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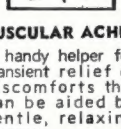

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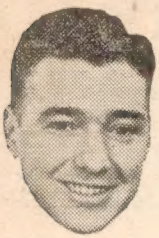

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VOL. XXXIX, NO. 3 A THRILLING PUBLICATION FEBRUARY, 1952

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SAMUEL MINES, *Editor*

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A DEPARTMENT FOR SCIENCE FICTION FANS

IT IS a characteristic of news that the most fascinating items are sometimes buried away in the back pages among stories of local fires, garden club announcements, bright sayings of children and advice on home medical problems. Many of you may not have seen the short item dealing with the building of a new subway on Second Avenue in New York City, or the shorter item which followed. The firm of Pomerance & Breines, well-known architects, has offered the Planning Commission a plan to incorporate a freight level in the new subway in addition to its regular passenger lanes. Freight would be handled by "movable conveyor belts or by tractor trams." Shipments moving along the tunnels would be received directly in the basements of buildings along the way.

Such plans have been offered before. The startling thing here is that the idea is receiving the serious consideration and respectful attention of the Planning Commission, the Board of Transportation and the Mayor.

The First Break

If you have ever torn your hair over the lethargy of public servants, the time may have come to utter one small discreet hosanna. Here, fellow conspirators, is the first visible break, the first move in the direction of the city of the future.

Lacking intelligent planning, our cities have simply grown—grown larger and more unwieldy in the same shapeless pattern with which they began. The congestion in and around any urban center is not only appalling, it is idiotic. In any town controlled by traffic lights, half the city is always standing still and waiting for the other half to go by. The community never operates at more than 50% of its capacity. And to take a Sunday drive on the roads within 50 miles of a metropolitan area is to invite a choice of sudden death or slow, blithering insanity.

It would seem pretty obvious that our cities cannot be allowed simply to go on becoming larger. It was no cynic, but merely an observant man, who first remarked that the automobile would eventually cancel itself out when there were so many of them that none of them could move.

Hot Spots

This condition is already apparent in such hot spots as the midtown district of New York, where at theater time it may take an hour to move half a dozen blocks. But almost any volume of traffic could be handled if it were not forever at cross-purposes. And separate traffic levels are so obvious a solution that the only wonder is how long we must wait before we begin building in that direction.

Those who look with suspicion on this type of futuristic growth, because of fear that it might lead to the mechanized, soulless "city-states" of some science-fiction epics, may be unnecessarily alarmed. Visualize a city in which all freight and trucking is handled on subterranean roadways beneath the surface; in which passenger car traffic flows north and south on one level—east and west on another—with never a traffic light or a stop. And above all, far from fumes, noise, motion and danger, a rooftop promenade for pedestrians, with all the grass and trees and gardens and store fronts for window shopping their hearts could desire.

Such a city is likely to be far more relaxing, quiet, safer, healthier, cleaner and more enjoyable to live in than our present Gehennas of dirt and noise and jittery nerves.

The Language of Science

Such an idea is too familiar to sell here. But an application suggests itself. There are a lot

(Continued on page 132)

WHAT SECRET POWER DID THIS MAN POSSESS?

Benjamin Franklin
(A Rosicrucian)

WHY was this man great? How does anyone—man or woman—achieve greatness? Is it not by mastery of the powers within ourselves?

Know the mysterious world within you! Attune yourself to the wisdom of the ages! Grasp the inner power of your mind! Learn the secrets of a full and peaceful life! Benjamin Franklin—like many other learned and great men and women—was a Rosicrucian. The Rosicrucians (NOT a religious organization) first came to America in 1694. Today, headquarters of the Rosicrucians send over seven million pieces of mail annually to all parts of the world.

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AT LAST JIM LEARNS THE SECRET THAT HAS BAFFLED LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS FOR MONTHS

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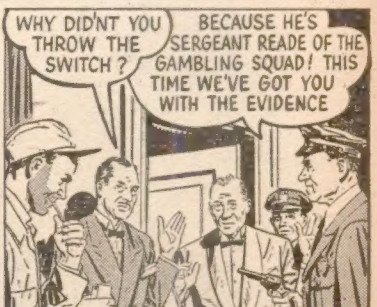
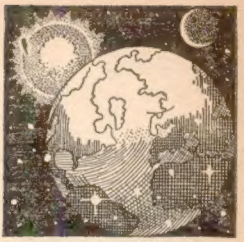


AT HEADQUARTERS

What's New in Science?



ADD TO MOMENTOUS DISCOVERIES in science the earth-shaking information that children use up more energy in washing dishes than adults. 39% is the figure, if you are a bear for figures. And not only dishwashing—boys use more energy than their fathers for the same job of carpentry, girls more energy than their mothers for the same task of sewing. Unmeasured is the amount of energy squandered by adults in catching the youngsters to make them wash the dishes, etc. If you added that in, it would look bad for the adults.

IF YOU ARE WORRIED about the flash heat and radiation from A-bombs, hie yourself to the corner grocery and buy a few rolls of aluminum foil. With this stuff fashion yourself a head-to-floor robe, including hood, and you will be about as safe as you can get. Aluminum reflects incredible amounts of heat, which is apparently the worst hazard if you are close to where a bomb falls. Failing aluminum, even a white robe will reflect a lot of the heat. This is particularly important if you are a dark-skinned person, as dark skin absorbs 90% of the radiated heat, while white skin absorbs only 60%.

JOHN L. LEWIS may be looking for a new job if certain developments in mining technique become more widely spread. Coal in very deep seams is set afire by means of a thermite bomb, air or oxygen is pumped down to keep it burning and the result is a rush of hot gas which will turn a turbine to generate electric power right at the mine. This bypasses a lot of intermediate steps and saves untold hours of man labor. It could also result in the elimination of miners altogether.

SPEAKING AT THE MEXICAN SCIENTIFIC CONGRESS in Mexico City, Dr. Harlow Shapley of Harvard College suggested the existence of tremendous stars almost as large as our entire solar system. Reasoning from the photometric analysis of their light, Dr. Shapley believes these stars to have a dense and intensely bright center, with an outer layer of thinner matter. The radius of one huge orb is estimated at 500 million miles, but the matter in the outer layer is so thinly distributed as to make the best vacuum we have been able to achieve on earth look solid. With all that, some of the new giants are as much as 50,000 times brighter than our sun. They are 80,000 light years away, in the large Magellanic Cloud.

RAINMAKING IS GETTING a second look. After the initial enthusiastic reports, a slight letdown set in and the U. S. Weather Bureau is now conducting an investigation to decide whether or not people who bought rain were taken to the cleaners. There is so much variation and guesswork in rainfall that no one has been able to say definitely that the rainmakers have helped—or failed.

ANOTHER HUGE STEP toward making man independent of his perishable body has been taken. Dr. John Gibbon of Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia believes that an artificial heart and lung will be in use within a year. So far they cannot be considered as permanent replacements, but even on a temporary scale they can be life-savers by taking over during a serious illness or operation. Further research is backed by an $89,893 grant by the National Heart Institute.

IF YOU LEARNED IN SCHOOL that there are nine planets in our solar system you are a little bit wrong. There are nine big planets, but there are hundreds—maybe thousands—of little planets and new ones are being discovered every day. Some of these are little fellows, only a half-mile or so across. And some are bigger. Ceres, the first discovered in 1801 by a Sicilian astronomer named Piazzi, is almost 500 miles across and would make a nice summer resort for anyone able to reach it. Pallas, discovered in 1802, is about 300 miles across. Juno is 118 miles across and Vesta, which can be seen with the naked eye, is 248 miles. Hermes is a real baby, only half a mile in diameter. Then there is Eros, shaped like a dumbbell, and Hidalgo and Icarus and something like 1500 more to be discovered. So don't let anyone tell you there are only nine planets in our solar system.

Abercrombie

Station

A Novel by JACK VANCE

I

THE doorkeeper was a big hard-looking man with an unwholesome horse-face, a skin like corroded zinc. Two girls spoke to him, asking arch questions.

Jean saw him grunt noncommittally. "Just stick around; I can't give out no dope."

He motioned to the girl sitting beside Jean, a blonde girl, very smartly turned out. She rose to her feet; the doorkeeper slid back the door. The blonde girl

walked swiftly through into the inner room; the door closed behind her.

She moved tentatively forward, stopped short.

A man sat quietly on an old-fashioned leather couch, watching through half-closed eyes.

Nothing frightening here, was her initial impression. He was young—twenty-four or twenty-five. Mediocre, she thought, neither tall nor short, stocky nor lean. His hair was nondescript, his features without distinction, his clothes unobtrusive and neutral.

He shifted his position, opened his eyes a flicker. The blonde girl felt a quick pang. Perhaps she had been mistaken.

"How old are you?"

"I'm—twenty."

"Take off your clothes."

She stared, hands tight and white-knuckled on her purse. Intuition came suddenly; she drew a quick shallow breath. *Obey him once, give in once, he'll be your master as long as you live.*

"No. . . No, I won't."

She turned quickly, reached for the door-slide. He said unemotionally, "You're too old anyway."

The door jerked aside; she walked quickly through the outer room, looking neither right nor left.

A hand touched her arm. She stopped, looked down into a face that was jet, pale rose, ivory. A young face with an expression of vitality and intelligence: black eyes, short black hair, a beautiful clear skin, mouth without make-up.

Jean asked, "What goes on? What kind of job is it?"

The blonde girl said in a tight voice, "I don't know. I didn't stay to find out. It's nothing nice." She turned, went through the outer door.

Jean sank back into the chair, pursed her lips speculatively. A minute passed. Another girl, nostrils flared wide, came from the inner room, crossed to the door, looking neither right nor left.

Jean smiled faintly. She had a wide mouth, expansive and flexible. Her teeth were small, white, very sharp.

The doorkeeper motioned to her. She jumped to her feet without using her hands, entered the inner room.

The quiet man was smoking. A silvery plume rose past his face, melted into the air over his head. Jean thought, there's something strange in his complete immobility. He's too tight, too compressed.

She put her hands behind her back and waited, watching carefully.

"How old are you?"

THIS was a question she usually found wise to evade. She tilted her head sidewise, smiling, a mannerism which gave her a wild and reckless look. "How old do you think I am?"

"Sixteen or seventeen."

"That's close enough."

He nodded. "Close enough. What's your name?"

"Jean Parlier."

"Who do you live with?"

"No one. I live alone."

"Father? Mother?"

"Dead."

"Grandparents? Guardian?"

"I'm alone."

He nodded. "Any trouble with the law on that account?"

She considered him warily. "No."

He moved his head enough to send a kink running up the feather of smoke. "Take off your clothes."

"Why?"

"It's a quick way to check your qualifications."

"Well—yes. In a way I guess it is. . . Physical or moral?"

He made no reply, sat looking at her impassively, the gray skein of smoke rising past his face.

She shrugged, put her hands to her

sides, to her neck, to her waist, to her back, to her legs, and stood without clothes.

He put the cigarette to his mouth, puffed, sat up, stubbed it out, rose to his feet, walked slowly forward.

He's trying to scare me, she thought, and smiled quietly to herself. He could try.

He stopped two feet away, stood looking down into her eyes. "You really want a million dollars?"

"That's why I'm here."

"You took the advertisement in the literal sense of the words?"

"Is there any other way?"

"You might have construed the language as—metaphor, hyperbole."

She grinned, showing her sharp white teeth. "I don't know what those words mean. Anyway I'm here. If the advertisement was only intended for you to look at me naked, I'll leave."

His expression did not change. Peculiar, thought Jean, how his body moved, his head turned, but his eyes always seemed fixed. He said as if he had not heard her, "Not too many girls have applied."

"That doesn't concern me. I want a million dollars. What is it? Blackmail? Impersonation?"

He passed over her question. "What would you do with a million if you had it?"

"I don't know... I'll worry about that when I get it. Have you checked my qualifications? I'm cold."

He turned quickly, strode to the couch, seated himself. She slipped into her clothes, came over to the couch, took a tentative seat facing him.

He said dryly, "You fill the qualifications almost too well!"

"How so?"

"It's unimportant."

Jean tilted her head, laughed. She looked like a healthy, very pretty high-school girl who might be the better for more sunshine. "Tell me what I'm to do to earn a million dollars."

"You're to marry a wealthy young man, who suffers from—let us call it, an incurable disease. When he dies, his property will be yours. You will sell his property to me for a million dollars."

"Evidently he's worth more than a million dollars."

He was conscious of the questions she did not ask. "There's somewhere near a billion involved."

"What kind of disease does he have? I might catch it myself."

"I'll take care of the disease end. You won't catch it if you keep your nose clean."

"Oh—oh, I see—tell me more about him. Is he handsome? Big? Strong? I might feel sorry if he died."

"He's eighteen years old. His main interest is collecting." Sardonically: "He likes zoology too. He's an eminent zoologist. His name is Earl Abercrombie. He owns—" he gestured up—"Abercrombie Station."

Jean stared, then laughed feebly. "That's a hard way to make a million dollars. . . Earl Abercrombie. . ."

"Squeamish?"

"Not when I'm awake. But I do have nightmares."

"Make up your mind."

She looked modestly to where she had folded her hands in her lap. "A million isn't a very large cut out of a billion."

He surveyed her with something like approval. "No. It isn't."

She rose to her feet, slim as a dancer. "All you do is sign a check. I have to marry him, get in bed with him."

"They don't use beds on Abercrombie Station."

"Since he lives on Abercrombie, he might not be interested in me."

"Earl is different," said the quiet man. "Earl likes gravity girls."

"You must realize that once he dies, you'd be forced to accept whatever I chose to give you. Or the property might be put in charge of a trustee."

"Not necessarily. The Abercrombie Civil Regulation allows property to be controlled by anyone sixteen or over. Earl is eighteen. He exercises complete control over the Station, subject to a few unimportant restrictions. I'll take care of that end." He went to the door, slid it open. "Hammond."

The man with the long face came wordlessly to the door.

"I've got her. Send the others home."

He closed the door, turned to Jean. "I want you to have dinner with me."

"I'm not dressed for dinner."

"I'll send up the couturier. Try to be ready in an hour."

HE LEFT the room. The door closed. Jean stretched, threw back her head, opened her mouth in a soundless exultant laugh. She raised her arms over her head, took a step forward, turned a supple cart-wheel across the rug, bounced to her feet beside the window.

She knelt, rested her head on her hands, looked across Metropolis. Dusk had come. The great gray-golden sky filled three-quarters of her vision. A thousand feet below was the wan gray, lavender and black crumble of surface buildings, the pallid roadways streaming with golden motes. To the right, aircraft slid silently along force-guides to the mountain suburbs—tired normal people bound to pleasant normal homes. What would they think if they knew that she, Jean Parlier, was watching? For instance, the man who drove that shiny Skyfarer with the pale green chevrets. . . She built a picture of him: pudgy, forehead creased with lines of worry. He'd be hurrying home to his wife, who would listen tolerantly while he boasted or grumbled. Cattle-women, cow-women, thought Jean without rancor. What man could subdue her? Where was the man who was wild and hard and bright enough? . . . Remembering her new job, she grimaced. Mrs. Earl Abercrombie. She looked up into the sky. The stars were not yet out and the lights of Abercrombie Station could not be seen.

A million dollars, think of it! "What will you do with a million dollars?" her new employer had asked her, and now that she returned to it, the idea was uncomfortable, like a lump in her throat.

What *would* she do with a million dollars?

Idly she tried to picture herself. How would she look? How would she feel? How would she. . . Her mind moved away from the subject, recoiled with the faintest trace of anger, as if it were a subject not to be touched upon. "Rats," said Jean. "Time to worry about it after I get it. . . A million dollars. Not too large a cut out of a billion, actually. Two million would be better."

Her eyes followed a slim red airboat diving along a sharp curve into the parking area: a sparkling new Marshall Moon-chaser. Now there was something she wanted. It would be one of her first purchases.

The door slid open. Hammond the doorkeeper looked briefly in. Then the couturier entered, pushing his wheeled kit before him, a slim little blond man with rich topaz eyes. The door closed.

Jean turned away from the window. The couturier—André was the name stencilled on the enamel of the box—spoke for more light, walked around her, darting glances up and down her body.

"Yes," he muttered, pressing his lips in and out. "Ah, yes. . . Now what does the lady have in mind?"

"A dinner gown, I suppose."

He nodded. "Mr. Fotheringay mentioned formal evening wear."

So that was his name—Fotheringay.

André snapped up a screen. "Observe,

if you will, a few of my effects; perhaps there is something to please you."

Models appeared on the screen, stepping forward, smiling, turning away.

Jean said, "Something like that."

André made a gesture of approval, snapped his fingers. "Orare-Lei. Mademoiselle has good taste. And now we shall see. . . If mademoiselle will let me help her. . . ."

He deftly unzipped her garments, laid them on the couch.

"First—we refresh ourselves." He selected a tool from his kit, and holding her wrist between delicate thumb and forefinger, sprayed her arms with cool mist, then warm perfumed air. Her skin tingled, fresh, invigorated.

André tapped his chin. "Now, the foundation."

She stood, eyes half-closed, while he bustled around her, striding off, making whispered comments, quick gestures with significance only to himself.

He sprayed her with gray-green web, touched and pulled as the strands set. He adjusted knurled knobs at the ends of a flexible tube, pressed it around her waist, swept it away, and it trailed shining black-green silk. He artfully twisted and wound his tube. He put the frame back in the kit, pulled, twisted, pinched, while the silk set.

He sprayed her with wan white, quickly jumped forward, folded, shaped, pinched, pulled, bunched and the stuff fell in twisted bands from her shoulders and into a full rustling skirt.

"Now—gauntlets." He covered her arms and hands with warm black-green pulp which set into spangled velvet, adroitly cut with scissors to bare the back of her hand.

"Slippers," Black satin, webbed with emerald-green phosphorescence.

"Now—the ornaments." He hung a red bauble from her right ear, slipped a cabochon ruby on her right hand.

"Scent—a trace. The Levailleur, indeed." He flicked her with an odor suggestive of a Central Asia flower patch. "And mademoiselle is dressed. And may I say—" he bowed with a flourish—"most exquisitely beautiful."

He manipulated his cart, one side fell away. A mirror uncoiled upward.

Jean inspected herself. Vivid naiad. When she acquired that million dollars—two million would be better—she'd put André on her permanent payroll.

André was still muttering compliments. "—Elan supreme. She is magic. Most striking. Eyes will turn. . . ."

The door slid back. Fotheringay came into the room. André bowed low, clasped his hands.

Fotheringay glanced at her. "You're ready. Good. Come along."

Jean thought, we might as well get this straight right now.

"Where?"

He frowned slightly, stood aside while André pushed his cart out.

Jean said, "I came here of my own free will. I walked in this room under my own power. Both times I knew where I was going. Now you say 'Come

Heavyweight Heaven

THERE have always been colonies—colonies of nudists, artists, vegetarians, nonconformists and plain old rugged individualists. Here at Abercrombie Station, for the first time, we have a colony for fat people. Nor is their chosen isolation intended merely to avoid ridicule. It has a practical advantage. Far from Earth's burdensome gravity, freed of the chains of their weight, the fat people can skip as lithesome as lambs on the green, while their avoirdupois, instead of sagging grotesquely, balloons in rich, rosy, enticing curves.

Everybody has a different idea of paradise, but if you happen to be dieting—or should be—you'll have fun with Jack Vance's idea of a heavyweight heaven.

—The Editor

with me.' First I want to know where. Then I'll decide whether or not I'll come."

"You don't want a million dollars very badly."

"Two million. I want it badly enough to waste an afternoon investigating. . . But—if I don't get it today, I'll get it tomorrow. Or next week. Somehow I'll get it; a long time ago I made my mind up. So?" She performed an airy curtsey.

His pupils contracted. He said in an even voice, "Very well. Two million. I am now taking you to dinner on the roof, where I will give you your instructions."

II

THEY drifted under the dome, in a greenish plastic bubble. Below them spread the commercial fantasy of an out-world landscape: gray sward; gnarled red and green trees casting dramatic black shadows; a pond of fluorescent green liquid; panels of exotic blossoms; beds of fungus.

The bubble drifted easily, apparently at random, now high under the near-invisible dome, now low under the foliage. Successive courses appeared from the center of the table, along with chilled wine and frosted punch.

It was wonderful and lavish, thought Jean. But why should Fotheringay spend his money on her? Perhaps he entertained romantic plans. . . She dallied with the idea, inspected him covertly. . . The idea lacked conviction. He seemed to be engaging in none of the usual gambits. He neither tried to fascinate her with his charm, nor swamp her with synthetic masculinity. Much as it irritated Jean to admit it, he appeared—indifferent.

Jean compressed her lips. The idea was disconcerting. She essayed a slight smile, a side glance up under lowered lashes.

"Save it," said Fotheringay. "You'll need it all when you get up to Abercrombie."

Jean returned to her dinner. After a minute she said calmly, "I was—curious."

"Now you know."

Jean thought to tease him, draw him out. "Know what?"

"Whatever it was you were curious about."

"Pooh. Men are mostly alike. They all have the same button. Push it, they all jump the same direction."

Fotheringay frowned, glanced at her under narrowed eyes. "Maybe you aren't so precocious after all."

Jean became tense. In a curious indefinable way, the subject was very important, as if survival were linked with confidence in her own sophistication and flexibility. "What do you mean?"

"You make the assumption most pretty girls make," he said with a trace of scorn. "I thought you were smarter than that."

Jean frowned. There had been little abstract thinking in her background. "Well, I've never had it work out differently. Although I'm willing to admit there're exceptions. . . It's a kind of game. I've never lost. If I'm kidding myself, it hasn't made much difference so far."

Fotheringay relaxed. "You've been lucky."

Jean stretched out her arms, arched her body, smiled as if at a secret. "Call it luck."

"Luck won't work with Earl Abercrombie."

"You're the one who used the word luck. I think it's, well—ability."

"You'll have to use your brains too." He hesitated then said, "Actually, Earl likes—odd things."

Jean sat looking at him, frowning.

He said coolly, "You're making up your mind how best to ask the question 'What's odd about me?' "

Jean snapped, "I don't need you to tell me what's odd about me. I know what it is myself."

Fotheringay made no comment.

"I'm completely on my own," said

Jean. "There's not a soul in all the human universe that I care two pins for. I do just exactly as I please." She watched him carefully. He nodded indifferently. Jean quelled her exasperation, leaned back in her chair, studied him as if he were in a glass case. . . A strange young man. Did he ever smile? She thought of the Capellan Fibrates who by popular superstition were able to fix themselves along a man's spinal column and control his intelligence. Fotheringay displayed a coldness strange enough to suggest such a possession. . . A Capellan could manipulate but one hand at a time. Fotheringay held a knife in one hand, a fork in the other and moved both hands together. So much for that.

He said quietly, "I watched your hands, too."

Jean threw back her head and laughed —a healthy adolescent laugh. Fotheringay watched her without discernible expression.

She said, "Actually, you'd like to know about me, but you're too stiff-necked to ask."

"You were born at Angel City on Codiron," said Fotheringay. "Your mother abandoned you in a tavern, a gambler named Joe Parlier took care of you until you were ten, when you killed him and three other men and stowed away on the Gray Line Packet *Bucyrus*. You were taken to the Waif's Home at Paie on Bella's Pride. You ran away and the Superintendent was found dead. . . Shall I go on? There's five more years of it."

Jean sipped her wine, nowise abashed. "You've worked fast. . . But you've misrepresented. You said 'There's five years more of it, shall I go on?' as if you were able to go on. You don't know anything about the next five years."

Fotheringay's face changed by not a flicker. He said as if she had not spoken, "Now listen carefully. This is what you'll have to look out for."

"Go ahead. I'm all ears." She leaned back in her chair. A clever technique, ignoring an unwelcome situation as if it never existed. Of course, to carry it off successfully, a certain temperament was required. A cold fish like Fotheringay managed very well.

"Tonight a man named Webbard meets us here. He is chief steward at Abercrombie Station. I happen to be able to influence certain of his actions. He will take you up with him to Abercrombie and install you as a servant in the Abercrombie private chambers."

Jean wrinkled her nose. "Servant? Why can't I go to Abercrombie as a paying guest?"

"It wouldn't be natural. A girl like you would go up to Capricorn or *Verge*. Earl Abercrombie is extremely suspicious. He'd be certain to fight shy of you. His mother, old Mrs. Clara, watches him pretty closely, and keeps drilling into his head the idea that all the Abercrombie girls are after his money. As a servant you will have opportunity to meet him in intimate circumstances. He rarely leaves his study; he's absorbed in his collecting."

"My word," murmured Jean. "What does he collect?"

"Everything you can think of," said Fotheringay, moving his lips upward in a quick grimace, almost a smile. "I understand from Webbard, however, that he is rather romantic, and has carried on a number of flirtations among the girls of the station."

Jean screwed up her mouth in fastidious scorn. Fotheringay watched her impassively.

"When do I—commence?"

"Webbard goes up on the supply barge tomorrow. You'll go with him."

A whisper of sound from the buzzer. Fotheringay touched the button. "Yes?"

"Mr. Webbard for you, sir."

Fotheringay directed the bubble down to the landing stage.

Webbard was waiting, the fattest man Jean had ever seen.

THE PLAQUE on the door read, Richard Mycroft, Attorney-at-Law. Somewhere far back down the years,

someone had said in Jean's hearing that Richard Mycroft was a good attorney.

The receptionist was a dark woman about thirty-five, with a direct penetrating eye. "Do you have an appointment?"

"No," said Jean. "I'm in rather a hurry."

The receptionist hesitated a moment, then bent over the communicator. "A young lady—Miss Jean Parlier—to see you. New business."

"Very well."

The receptionist nodded to the door. "You can go in," she said shortly.

She doesn't like me, thought Jean. Because I'm what she was and what she wants to be again.

Mycroft was a square man with a pleasant face. Jean constructed a wary defense against him. If you liked someone and they knew it, they felt obligated to advise and interfere. She wanted no advice, no interference. She wanted two million dollars.

"Well, young lady," said Mycroft. "What can I do for you?"

He's treating me like a child, thought Jean. Maybe I look like a child to him. She said, "It's a matter of advice. I don't know much about fees. I can afford to pay you a hundred dollars. When you advise me a hundred dollars worth, let me know and I'll go away."

"A hundred dollars buys a lot of advice," said Mycroft. "Advice is cheap."

"Not from a lawyer."

Mycroft became practical. "What are your troubles?"

"It's understood that this is all confidential?"

"Certainly." Mycroft's smile froze into a polite grimace.

"It's nothing illegal—so far as I'm concerned—but I don't want you passing out any quiet hints to—people that might be interested."

Mycroft straightened himself behind his desk. "A lawyer is expected to respect the confidence of his client."

"Okay. . . Well, it's like this." She told him of Fotheringay, of Abercrombie Station and Earl Abercrombie. She said that Earl Abercrombie was sick with an incurable disease. She made no mention of Fotheringay's convictions on that subject. It was a matter she herself kept carefully brushed out of her mind. Fotheringay had hired her. He told her what to do, told her that Earl Abercrombie was sick. That was good enough for her. If she had asked too many questions, found that things were too nasty even for her stomach, Fotheringay would have found another girl less inquisitive. . . She skirted the exact nature of Earl's disease. She didn't actually know, herself. She didn't want to know.

Mycroft listened attentively, saying nothing.

"What I want to know is," said Jean, "is the wife sure to inherit on Abercrombie? I don't want to go to a lot of trouble for nothing. And after all Earl is under twenty-one; I thought that in the event of his death it was best to—well, make sure of everything first."

For a moment Mycroft made no move, but sat regarding her quietly. Then he tamped tobacco into a pipe.

"Jean," he said, "I'll give you some advice. It's free. No strings on it."

"Don't bother," said Jean. "I don't want the kind of advice that's free. I want the kind I have to pay for."

Mycroft grimaced. "You're a remarkably wise child."

"I've had to be. . . Call me a child, if you wish."

"Just what will you do with a million dollars? Or two million, I understand it to be?"

Jean stared. Surely the answer was obvious. . . Or was it? When she tried to find an answer, nothing surfaced.

"Well," she said vaguely, "I'd like an airboat, some nice clothes, and maybe. . ." In her mind's-eye she suddenly saw herself surrounded by friends. Nice people, like Mr. Mycroft.

"If I were a psychologist and not a lawyer," said Mycroft, "I'd say you wanted your mother and father more than you wanted two million dollars."

Jean became very heated. "No, no!

I don't want them at all. They're dead." As far as she was concerned they were dead. They had died for her when they left her on Joe Parlier's pool-table in the old Aztec Tavern.

Jean said indignantly, "Mr. Mycroft, I know you mean well, but tell me what I want to know."

"I'll tell you," said Mycroft, "because if I didn't, someone else would. Abercrombie property, if I'm not mistaken, is regulated by its own civil code. . . Let's see"—he twisted in his chair, pushed buttons on his desk.

On the screen appeared the index to the Central Law Library. Mycroft made further selections, narrowing down selectively. A few seconds later he had the information. "Property control begins at sixteen. Widow inherits at minimum fifty percent; the entire estate unless specifically stated otherwise in the will."

"Good," said Jean. She jumped to her feet. "That's what I wanted to make sure of."

Mycroft asked, "When do you leave?"

"This afternoon."

"I don't need to tell you that the idea behind the scheme is—not moral."

"Mr. Mycroft, you're a dear. But I don't have any morals."

He tilted his head, shrugged, puffed on his pipe. "Are you sure?"

"Well—yes." Jean considered a moment. "I suppose so. Do you want me to go into details?"

"No. I think what I meant to say was, are you sure you know what you want out of life?"

"Certainly. Lots of money."

Mycroft grinned. "That's really not a good answer. What will you buy with your money?"

Jean felt irrational anger rising in her throat. "Oh—lots of things." She rose to her feet. "Just what do I owe you, Mr. Mycroft?"

"Oh—ten dollars. Give it to Ruth."

"Thank you, Mr. Mycroft." She stalked out of his office.

As she marched down the corridor she was surprised to find that she was angry with herself as well as irritated with Mr. Mycroft. . . He had no right making people wonder about themselves. It wouldn't be so bad if she weren't wondering a little already.

But this was all nonsense. Two million dollars was two million dollars. When she was rich, she'd call on Mr. Mycroft and ask him if honestly he didn't think it was worth a few little lapses.

And today—up to Abercrombie Station. She suddenly became excited.

III

THE PILOT of the Abercrombie supply barge was emphatic. "No sir, I think you're making a mistake, nice little girl like you."

He was a chunky man in his thirties, hard-bitten and positive. Sparse blond hair crusted his scalp, deep lines gave his mouth a cynical slant. Webbard, the Abercrombie chief steward, was billeted astern, in the special handling locker. The usual webbings were inadequate to protect his corpulence; he floated chin-deep in a tankful of emulsion the same specific gravity as his body.

There was no passenger cabin and Jean had slipped into the seat beside the pilot. She wore a modest white frock, a white toque, a gray and black striped jacket.

The pilot had few good words for Abercrombie Station. "Now it's what I call a shame, taking a kid like you to serve the likes of them. . . Why don't they get one of their own kind? Surely both sides would be the happier."

Jean said innocently, "I'm going up for only just a little bit."

"So you think. It's catching. In a year you'll be like the rest of them. The air alone is enough to sicken a person, rich and sweet like olive oil. Me, I never set foot outside the barge unless I can't help it."

"Do you think I'll be—safe?" She raised her lashes, turned him her reckless sidelong look.

He licked his lips, moved in his seat. "Oh, you'll be safe enough," he mutterd. "At least from them that's been there awhile. You might have to duck a few just fresh from Earth. . . After they've lived on the station a bit their ideas change and they wouldn't spit on the best part of an Earth girl."

"Hmmph." Jean compressed her lips. Earl Abercrombie had been born on the station.

"But I wasn't thinking so much of that," said the pilot. It was hard, he thought, talking straight sense to a kid so young and inexperienced. "I meant in that atmosphere you'll be apt to let yourself go. Pretty soon you'll look like the rest of 'em—never want to leave. Some aren't *able* to leave—couldn't stand it back on Earth if they wanted to."

"Oh—I don't think so. Not in my case."

"It's catching," said the pilot vehemently. "Look, kid, I know. I've ferried out to all the stations, I've seen 'em come and go. Each station has its own kind of weirdness, and you can't keep away from it." He chuckled self-consciously. "Maybe that's why I'm so batty myself. . . Now take Madeira Station. Gay. Frou-frou." He made a mincing motion with his fingers. "That's Madeira. You wouldn't know much about that. . . But take Balchester Aerie, take Merlin Dell, take the Starhome—"

"Surely, some are just pleasure resorts?"

The pilot grudgingly admitted that of the twenty-two resort satellites, fully half were as ordinary as Miami Beach. "But the others—oh, Moses!" He rolled his eyes back. "And Abercrombie is the worst."

There was silence in the cabin. Earth was a monstrous, green, blue, white and black ball over Jean's shoulder. The sun made a furious hole in the sky below. Ahead were the stars—and a set of blinking blue and red lights.

"Is that Abercrombie?"

"No, that's the Masonic Temple. Abercrombie is on out a ways. . . ." He looked diffidently at her from the corner of his eye. "Now—look! I don't want you to think I'm fresh. Or maybe I do. But if you're hard up for a job—why don't you come back to Earth with me? I got a pretty nice shack in Long Beach—nothing fancy—but it's on the beach, and it'll be better than working for a bunch of side-show freaks."

Jean said absently, "No thanks." The pilot pulled in his chin, pulled his elbows close against his body, glowered.

An hour passed. From behind came a rattle, and a small panel slid back. Webbard's pursy face showed through. The barge was coasting on free momentum, gravity was negated. "How much longer to the station?"

"It's just ahead. Half an hour, more or less, and we'll be fished up tight and right." Webbard grunted, withdrew.

Yellow and green lights winked ahead. "That's Abercrombie," said the pilot. He reached out to a handle. "Brace yourself." He pulled. Pale blue check-jets streamed out ahead.

From behind came a thump and an angry cursing. The pilot grinned. "Got him good." The jets roared a minute, died. "Every trip it's the same way. Now in a minute he'll stick his head through the panel and bawl me out."

The portal slid back. Webbard showed his furious face. "Why in thunder don't you warn me before you check? I just now took a blow that might have hurt me! You're not much of a pilot, risking injuries of that sort!"

The pilot said in a droll voice, "Sorry sir, sorry indeed. Won't happen again."

"It had better not! If it does, I'll make it my business to see that you're discharged."

The portal snapped shut. "Sometimes I get him better than others," said the pilot. "This was a good one, I could tell by the thump."

He shifted in his seat, put his arm around Jean's shoulders, pulled her against him. "Let's have a little kiss, before we fish home."

Jean leaned forward, reached out her

arm. He saw her face coming toward him—bright wonderful face, onyx, pale rose, ivory, smiling hot with life. . . She reached past him, thrust the check valve. Four jets thrashed forward. The barge jerked. The pilot fell into the instrument panel, comical surprise written on his face.

From behind came a heavy resonant thump.

The pilot pulled himself back into his seat, knocked back the check valve. Blood oozed from his chin, forming a little red wen. Behind them the portal snapped open. Webbard's face, black with rage, looked through.

When he had finally finished, and the portal had closed, the pilot looked at Jean, who was sitting quietly in her seat, the corners of her mouth drawn up dreamily.

He said from deep in his throat, "If I had you alone, I'd beat you half to death."

Jean drew her knees up under her chin, clasped her arms around, looked silently ahead.

ABERCROMBIE STATION had been built to the Fitch cylinder-design: a power and service core, a series of circular decks, a transparent sheath. To the original construction a number of modifications and annexes had been added. An outside deck circled the cylinder, sheet steel to hold the magnetic grapples of small boats, cargo binds, magnetic shoes, anything which was to be fixed in place for a greater or lesser time. At each end of the cylinder, tubes connected to dependent constructions. The first, a sphere, was the private residence of the Abercrombies. The second, a cylinder, rotated at sufficent speed to press the water it contained evenly over its inner surface to a depth of ten feet; this was the station swimming pool, a feature found on only three of the resort satellites.

The supply barge inched close to the deck, bumped. Four men attached con-

[Turn page]

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strictor tackle to rings in the hull, heaved the barge along to the supply port. The barge settled into its socket, grapples shot home, the ports sucked open.

Chief Steward Webbard was still smouldering, but now a display of anger was beneath his dignity. Disdaining magnetic shoes, he pulled himself to the entrance, motioned to Jean. "Bring your baggage."

Jean went to her neat little trunk, jerked it into the air, found herself floundering helpless in the middle of the cargo space. Webbard impatiently returned with magnetic clips for her shoes, and helped her float the trunk into the station.

She was breathing different, rich, air. The barge had smelled of ozone, grease, hemp sacking, but the station. . . Without consciously trying to identify the odor, Jean thought of waffles with butter and syrup mixed with talcum powder.

Webbard floated in front of her, an imposing spectacle. His fat no longer hung on him in folds; it ballooned out in an even perimeter. His face was smooth as a watermelon, and it seemed as if his features were incised, carved, rather than molded. He focused his eyes at a point above her dark head. "We had better come to an understanding, young lady."

"Certainly, Mr. Webbard."

"As a favor to my friend, Mr. Fotheringay, I have brought you here to work. Beyond this original and singular act, I am no longer responsible. I am not your sponsor. Mr. Fotheringay recommended you highly, so see that you give satisfaction. Your immediate superior will be Mrs. Blaiskell, and you must obey her implicitly. We have very strict rules here at Abercrombie—fair treatment and good pay—but you must earn it. Your work must speak for itself, and you can expect no special favors." He coughed. "Indeed, if I may say so, you are fortunate in finding employment here; usually we hire people more of our own sort, it makes for harmonious conditions.

Jean waited with demurely bowed head. Webbard spoke on further, detailing specific warnings, admonitions, injunctions.

Jean nodded dutifully. There was no point antagonizing pompous old Webbard. And Webbard thought that here was a respectful young lady, thin and very young and with a peculiar frenetic gleam in her eye, but sufficiently impressed by his importance. . . Good coloring too. Pleasant features. If she only could manage two hundred more pounds of flesh on her bones, she might have appealed to his grosser nature.

"This way then," said Webbard.

He floated ahead, and by some magnificent innate power continued to radiate the impression of inexorable dignity even while plunging head-first along the corridor.

Jean came more sedately, walking on her magnetic clips, pushing the trunk ahead as easily as if it had been a paper bag.

They reached the central core, and Webbard, after looking back over his bulging shoulders, launched himself up the shaft.

Panes in the wall of the core permitted a view of the various halls, lounges, refectories, salons. Jean stopped by a room decorated with red plush drapes and marble statuary. She stared, first in wonder, then in amusement.

Webbard called impatiently, "Come along now, miss, come along."

Jean pulled herself away from the pane. "I was watching the guests. They looked like—" she broke into a sudden giggle.

Webbard frowned, pursed his lips. Jean thought he was about to demand the grounds for her merriment, but evidently he felt it beneath his dignity. He called, "Come along now, I can spare you only a moment."

She turned one last glance into the hall, and now she laughed aloud.

Fat women, like bladder-fish in an

aquarium tank. Fat women, round and tender as yellow peaches. Fat women, miraculously easy and agile in the absence of gravity.

The occasion seemed to be an afternoon musicale. The hall was crowded and heavy with balls of pink flesh draped in blouses and pantaloons of white, pale blue and yellow.

The current Abercrombie fashion seemed designed to accent the round bodies. Flat bands like Sam Browne belts molded the breasts down and out, under the arms. The hair was parted down the middle, skinned smoothly back to a small roll at the nape of the neck. Flesh, bulbs of tender flesh, smooth shiny balloons. Tiny twitching features, dancing fingers and toes, eyes and lips roguishly painted. On Earth any one of these women would have sat immobile, a pile of sagging sweating tissue. At Abercrombie Station—"Adipose Alley," so-called along the Pipeline—they moved with the ease of dandelion puffs, and their faces and bodies were smooth as butter-balls.

"Come, come, come!" barked Webbard. "There's no loitering at Abercrombie!"

Jean restrained the impulse to slide her trunk up the core against Webbard's rotund buttocks, a tempting target.

He waited for her at the far end of the corridor.

"Mr. Webbard," she asked thoughtfully, "how much does Earl Abercrombie weigh?"

Webbard tilted his head back, glared reprovingly down his nose. "Such intimacies, miss, are not considered polite conversation here."

Jean said, "I merely wondered if he were as—well, imposing as you are."

Webbard sniffed. "I couldn't answer you. Mr. Abercrombie is a person of great competence. His—presence is a matter you must learn not to discuss. It's not proper, not done."

"Thank you, Mr. Webbard," said Jean meekly.

Webbard said, "You'll catch on. You'll make a good girl yet. Now, through the tube, and I'll take you to Mrs. Blaiskell."

Mrs. Blaiskell was short and squat as a kumquat. Her hair was steel-gray, and skinned back modishly to the roll behind her neck. She wore tight black rompers, the uniform of the Abercrombie servants, so Jean was to learn.

Jean suspected that she made a poor impression on Mrs. Blaiskell. She felt the snapping gray eyes search her from head to foot, and kept her own modestly down-cast.

Webbard explained that Jean was to be trained as a maid, and suggested that Mrs. Blaiskell use her in the Pleasaunce and the bedrooms.

Mrs. Blaiskell nodded. "Good idea. The young master is peculiar, as everyone knows, but he's been pestering the girls lately and interrupting their duties; wise to have one in there such as her—no offense, miss, I just mean it's the gravity that does it—who won't be so apt to catch his eye."

Webbard signed to her, and they floated off a little distance, conversing in low whispers.

Jean's wide mouth quivered at the corners. Old fools!

Five minutes passed. Jean began to fidget. Why didn't they do something? Take her somewhere. She suppressed her restlessness. Life! How good, how zestful! She wondered, will I feel this same joy when I'm twenty? When I'm thirty, forty? She drew back the corners of her mouth. Of course I will. I'll never let myself change. . . But life must be used to its best. Every flicker of ardor and excitement must be wrung free and tasted. She grinned. Here she floated, breathing the over-ripe air of Abercrombie Station. In a way it was adventure. It paid well—two million dollars, and only for seducing an eighteen-year-old boy. Seducing him, marrying him——what difference? Of course he was Earl Abercrombie, and if he were as imposing as Mr. Webbard. . . She considered Webbard's great body in wry

speculation. Oh well, two million was two million. If things got too bad, the price might go up. Ten million, perhaps. Not too large a cut out of a billion.

Webbard departed without a word, twitching himself easily back down the core.

"Come," said Mrs. Blaiskell. "I'll show you your room. You can rest and tomorrow I'll take you around."

IV

MRS. BLAISKELL stood by while Jean fitted herself into black rompers, frankly critical. "Lord have mercy, but you mustn't pinch in the waist so! You're rachity and thin to starvation now, poor child; you mustn't point it up so! Perhaps we can find a few air-floats to fill you out; not that it's essential, Lord knows, since you're but a dust-maid; still it always improves a household to have a staff of pretty women, and young Earl, I will say this for him and all his oddness, he does appreciate a handsome woman. . . Now then, your bosom, we must do something there; why you're nearly flat! You see, there's no scope to allow a fine drape down under the arms, see?" She pointed to her own voluminous rolls of adipose. "Suppose we just roll up a bit of cushion and—"

"No," said Jean tremulously. Was it possible that they thought her so ugly? "I won't wear padding."

Mrs. Blaiskell sniffed. "It's your own self that's to benefit, my dear. I'm sure it's not me that's the wizened one."

Jean bent over her black slippers. "No, you're very sleek."

Mrs. Blaiskell nodded proudly. "I keep myself well shaped out, and all the better for it. It wasn't so when I was your age, miss, I'll tell you; I was on Earth then—"

"Oh, you weren't born here?"

"No, miss, I was one of the poor souls pressed and ridden by gravity, and I burned up my body with the effort of mere conveyance. No, I was born in Sydney, Australia, of decent kind folk, but they were too poor to buy me place on Abercrombie . I was lucky enough to secure just such a position as you have, and that was while Mr. Justus, and old Mrs. Eva, his mother—that's Earl's grandmother—was still with us. I've never been down to Earth since. I'll never set foot on the surface again."

"Don't you miss the festivals and great buildings and all the lovely countryside?"

"Pah!" Mrs. Blaiskell spat the word. "And be pressed into hideous folds and wrinkles? And ride in a cart, and be stared at and snickered at by the home people? Thin as sticks they are with their constant worry and fight against the pull of the soil! No, miss, we have our own sceneries and fetes; there's a pavanne for tomorrow night, a Grand Masque Pantomime, a Pageant of Beautiful Women, all in the month ahead. And best, I'm among my own people, the round ones, and I've never a wrinkle on my face. I'm fine and full-blown, and I wouldn't trade with any of them below."

Jean shrugged. "If you're happy, that's all that matters." She looked at herself in the mirror with satisfaction. Even if fat Mrs. Blaiskell thought otherwise, the black rompers looked well on her, now that she'd fitted them snug to her hips and waist. Her legs—slender, round and shining ivory—were good, this she knew. Even if weird Mr. Webbard and odd Mrs. Blaiskell thought otherwise. Wait till she tried them on young Earl. He preferred gravity girls; Fotheringay had told her so. And yet—Webbard and Mrs. Blaiskell had hinted otherwise. Maybe he liked both kinds? . . . Jean smiled, a little tremulously. If Earl liked both kinds, then he would like almost anything that was warm, moved and breathed. And that certainly included herself.

If she asked Mrs. Blaiskell outright, she'd be startled and shocked. Good proper Mrs. Blaiskell. A motherly soul, not like the matrons in the various asy-

lums and waifs' homes of her experience. Strapping big women those had been—practical and quick with their hands. . . . But Mrs. Blaiskell was nice; she would never have deserted her child on a pool table. Mrs. Blaiskell would have struggled and starved herself to keep her child and raise her nicely. . . Jean idly speculated how it would seem with Mrs. Blaiskell for a mother. And Mr. Mycroft for a father. It gave her a queer prickly feeling, and also somehow called up from deep inside, a dark dull resentment tinged with anger.

Jean moved uneasily, fretfully. Never mind the nonsense! You're playing a lone hand. What would you want with relatives? What an ungodly nuisance! She would never have been allowed this adventure up to Abercrombie Station. . . On the other hand, with relatives there would be many fewer problems on how to spend two million dollars.

Jean sighed. Her own mother wasn't kind and comfortable like Mrs. Blaiskell. She couldn't have been, and the whole matter became an academic question. Forget it, put it clean out of your mind.

Mrs. Blaiskell brought forward service shoes, worn to some extent by everyone at the station: slippers with magnetic coils in the soles. Wires led to a power bank at the belt. By adjusting a rheostat, any degree of magnetism could be achieved.

"When a person works, she needs a footing," Mrs. Blaiskell explained. "Of course there's not much to do, once you get on to it. Cleaning is easy, with our good filters; still there's sometimes a stir of dust and always a little film of oil that settles from the air."

Jean straightened up. "Okay, Mrs. B., I'm ready. Where do we start?"

MRS. BLAISKELL raised her eyebrows at the familiarity, but was not seriously displeased. In the main, the girl seemed to be respectful, willing and intelligent. And—significantly—not the sort to create a disturbance with Mr. Earl.

Twitching a toe against a wall, she propelled herself down the corridor, halted by a white door, slid back the panel.

They entered a room as if from the ceiling. Jean felt an instant of vertigo, pushing herself head-first at what appeared to be a floor.

Mrs. Blaiskell deftly seized a chair, swung her body around, put her feet to the nominal floor. Jean joined her. They stood in a large round room, apparently a section across the building. Windows opened on space, stars shone in from all sides; the entire zodiac was visible with a sweep of the eyes.

Sunlight came up from below, shining on the ceiling, and off to one quarter hung the half moon, hard and sharp as a new coin. The room was rather too opulent for Jean's taste. She was conscious of an overwhelming surfeit of mustard-saffron carpet, white panelling with gold arabesques, a round table clamped to the floor, surrounded by chairs footed with magnetic casters. A crystal chandelier thrust rigidly down; rotund cherubs peered at intervals from the angle between wall and ceiling.

"The Pleasaunce," said Mrs. Blaiskell. "You'll clear in here every morning first thing." She described Jean's duties in detail.

"Next we go to—" she nudged Jean. "Here's old Mrs. Clara, Earl's mother. Bow your head, just as I do."

A woman dressed in rose-purple floated into the room. She wore an expression of absent-minded arrogance, as if in all the universe there were no doubt, uncertainty or equivocation. She was almost perfectly globular, as wide as she was tall. Her hair was silver-white, her face a bubble of smooth flesh, daubed apparently at random with rouge. She wore a collar of diamonds, or more correctly, a corselet, for the stones spread six inches down over her bulging bosom and shoulders.

Mrs. Blaiskell bowed her head unctuously. "Mrs. Clara dear, allow me to introduce the new parlor maid; she's new

up from Earth and very handy."

Mrs. Clara Abercrombie darted Jean a quick look. "Emaciated creature."

"Oh, she'll healthen up," cooed Mrs. Blaiskell. "Plenty of good food and hard work will do wonders for her; after all she's only a child."

"Mmmph. Hardly. It's blood, Blaiskell, and well you know it."

"Well, yes, of course, Mrs. Clara."

Mrs. Clara continued in a brassy voice, darting glances around the room. "Either it's good blood you have or vinegar. This girl here, she'll never be really comfortable, I can see it. It's not in her blood."

"No, ma'am, you're correct in what you say."

"It's not in Earl's blood. He's the one I'm worried for. Hugo was the rich one, but his brother Lionel after him, poor dear Lionel, and—"

"What about Lionel?" said a husky voice. Jean twisted. This was Earl. "Who's heard from Lionel?"

"No one, my dear. He's gone, he'll never be back. I was but commenting that neither one of you ever reached your growth, showing all bone as you do."

Earl scowled past his mother, past Mrs. Blaiskell, and his gaze fell on Jean. "What's this? Another servant? We don't need her. Send her away. Always ideas for more expense."

"She's for your rooms, Earl, my dear," said his mother.

"Where's Jessy? What was wrong with Jessy?"

Mrs. Clara and Mrs. Blaiskell exchanged indulgent glances. Jean turned Earl a slow arch look. He blinked, then frowned. Jean dropped her eyes, traced a pattern on the rug with her toe, an operation which she knew sent interesting movements along her leg. Earning the two million dollars wouldn't be as irksome as she had feared. Because Earl was not at all fat. He was stocky, solid, with bull shoulders and a bull neck. He had a close crop of tight blond curls, a florid complexion, a big waxy nose, a ponderous jaw. His mouth was good, drooping sullenly at the moment.

He was something less than attractive, thought Jean. On Earth she would have ignored him, or if he persisted, stung him to fury with a series of insults. But she had been expecting far worse: a bulbous creature like Webbard, a human balloon. . . Of course there was no real reason for Earl to be fat; the children of fat people were as likely as not to be of normal size.

Mrs. Clara was instructing Mrs. Blaiskell for the day, Mrs. Blaiskell nodding precisely on each sixth word and ticking off points on her stubby little fingers.

Mrs. Clara finished, Mrs. Blaiskell nodded to Jean. "Come, miss, there's work to be done."

Earl called after them, "Mind now, no one in my study!"

Jean asked curiously, "Why doesn't he want anyone in his study?"

"That's where he keeps all his collections. He won't have a thing disturbed. Very strange sometimes, Mr. Earl, you'll just have to make allowances, and be on your good behavior. In some ways he's harder to serve than Mrs. Clara."

"Earl was born here?"

Mrs. Blaiskell nodded. "He's never been down to Earth. Says it's a place of crazy people, and the Lord knows, he's more than half right."

"Who are Hugo and Lionel?"

"They're the two oldest. Hugo is dead, Lord rest him, and Lionel is off on his travels. Then under Earl there's Harper and Dauphin and Millicent and Clarice. That's all Mrs. Clara's children, all very proud and portly. Earl is the skinny lad of the lot, and very lucky too, because when Hugo died, Lionel was off gadding and so Earl inherited. . . Now here's his suite, and what a mess."

AS THEY worked Mrs. Blaiskell commented on various aspects of the room. "That bed now! Earl wasn't satisfied with sleeping under a saddleband like the rest of us, no! He wears

pajamas of magnetized cloth, and that weights him against the cushion almost as if he lived on Earth. . . And this reading and studying, my word, there's nothing the lad won't think of! And his telescope! He'll sit in the cupola and focus on Earth by the hour."

"Maybe he'd like to visit Earth?"

Mrs. Blaiskell nodded. "I wouldn't be surprised if you was close on it there. The place has a horrid fascination for him. But he can't leave Abercrombie, you know."

"That's strange. Why not?"

Mrs. Blaiskell darted her wise look. "Because then he forfeits his inheritance; that's in the original charter, that the owner must remain on the premises." She pointed to a gray door. "That there's his study. And now I'm going to give you a peep in, so you won't be tormented by curiosity and perhaps make trouble for yourself when I'm not around to keep an eye open . . . Now don't be excited by what you see; there's nothing to hurt you."

With the air of a priestess unveiling mystery. Mrs. Blaiskell fumbled a moment with the door-slide, manipulating it in a manner which Jean was not able to observe.

The door swung aside. Mrs. Blaiskell smirked as Jean jumped back in alarm.

"Now, now, now, don't be alarmed; I told you there was nothing to trouble. That's one of Master Earl's zoological specimens and rare trouble and expense he's gone to—"

Jean sighed deeply, and gave closer inspection to the horned black creature which stood on two legs just inside the door, poised and leaning as if ready to embrace the intruder in leathery black arms.

"That's the most scary part," said Mrs. Blaiskell in quiet satisfaction. "He's got his insects and bugs there—" she pointed "—his gems there, his old music disks there, his stamps there, his books along that cabinet. Nasty things, I'm ashamed of him. Don't let me know of you peeking in them nasty books that Mr. Earl gloats over."

"No, Mrs. Blaiskell," said Jean meekly. "I'm not interested in that kind of thing. If it's what I think it is."

Mrs. Blaiskell nodded emphatically. "It's what you think it is, and worse." She did not expand on the background of her familiarity with the library, and Jean thought it inappropriate to inquire.

Earl stood behind them. "Well?" he asked in a heavy sarcastic voice. "Getting an eyeful?" He kicked himself across the room, slammed shut the door.

Mrs. Blaiskell said in a conciliatory voice, "Now Mr. Earl, I was just showing the new girl what to avoid, what not to look at, and I didn't want her swounding of heart stoppage if innocent-like she happened to peek inside."

Earl grunted. "If she peeps inside while I'm there, she'll be 'swounding' from something more than heart-stoppage."

"I'm a good cook too," said Jean. She turned away. "Come, Mrs. Blaiskell, let's leave until Mr. Earl has recovered his temper. I won't have him hurting your feelings."

Mrs. Blaiskell stammered, "Now then! Surely there's no harm . . ." She stopped. Earl had gone into his study and slammed the door.

Mrs. Blaiskell's eyes glistened with thick tears. "Ah, my dear, I do so dislike harsh words . . ."

They worked in silence and finished the bedroom. At the door Mrs. Blaiskell said confidentially into Jean's ear, "Why do you think Earl is so gruff and grumpy?"

"I've no idea," breathed Jean. "None whatever."

"Well," said Mrs. Blaiskell warily, "it all boils down to this—his appearance. He's so self-conscious of his thinness that he's all eaten up inside. He can't bear to have anyone see him; he thinks they're sneering. I've heard him tell Mrs. Clara so. Of course they're not; they're just sorry. He eats like a horse, he takes gland-pellets, but still he's that spindly and all hard tense muscle." She

inspected Jean thoughtfully. "I think we'll put you on the same kind of regimen, and see if we can't make a prettier woman out of you." Then she shook her head doubtfully, clicked her tongue. "It might not be in your blood, as Mrs. Clara says. I hardly can see that it's in your blood. . . ."

V

THERE were tiny red ribbons on Jean's slippers, a red ribbon in her hair, a coquettish black beauty spot on her cheek. She had altered her rompers so that they clung unobtrusively to her waist and hips.

Before she left the room she examined herself in the mirror. "Maybe it's me that's out of step! How would I look with a couple hundred more pounds of grade? No. I suppose not. I'm the gamin type. I'll look like a wolverine when I'm sixty, but for the next forty years —watch out."

She took herself along the corridor, past the Pleasaunce, the music rooms, the formal parlor, the refectory, up into the bedrooms. She stopped by Earl's door, flung it open, entered, pushing the electrostatic duster ahead of her.

The room was dark; the transpar walls were opaque under the action of the scrambling field.

Jean found the dial, turned up the light.

Earl was awake. He lay on his side, his yellow magnetic pajamas pressing him into the mattress. A pale blue quilt was pulled up to his shoulders, his arm lay across his face. Under the shadow of his arm his eye smouldered out at Jean.

He lay motionless, too outraged to move.

Jean put her hands on her hips, said in her clear young voice, "Get up, you sluggard! You'll get as fat as the rest of them lounging around till all hours. . . ."

The silence was choked and ominous. Jean bent to peer under Earl's arm. "Are you alive?"

Without moving Earl said in a harsh low voice, "Exactly what do you think you're doing?"

"I'm about my regular duties. I've finished the Pleasaunce. Next comes your room."

His eyes went to a clock. "At seven o'clock in the morning?"

"Why not? The sooner I get done, the sooner I can get to my own business."

"Your own business be damned. Get out of here, before you get hurt."

"No, sir. I'm a self-determined individual. Once my work is done, there's nothing more important than self-expression."

"Get out!"

"I'm an artist, a painter. Or maybe I'll be a poet this year. Or a dancer. I'd make a wonderful ballerina. Watch." She essayed a pirouette, but the impulse took her up to the ceiling—not ungracefully, this she made sure.

She pushed herself back. "If I had magnetic slippers I could twirl an hour and a half. Grand jetés are easy. . . ."

He raised himself on his elbow, blinking and glaring, as if on the verge of launching himself at her.

"You're either crazy—or so utterly impertinent as to amount to the same thing."

"Not at all," said Jean. "I'm very courteous. There might be a difference of opinion, but still it doesn't make you automatically right."

He slumped back on the bed. "Argue with old Webbard," he said thickly. "Now—for the last time—get out!"

"I'll go," said Jean, "but you'll be sorry."

"Sorry?" His voice had risen nearly an octave. "Why should I be sorry?"

"Suppose I took offense at your rudeness and told Mr. Webbard I wanted to quit?"

Earl said through tight lips, "I'm going to talk to Mr. Webbard today and maybe you'll be asked to quit . . . Miraculous!" he told himself bitterly. "Scarecrow maids breaking in at sunup. . . ."

Jean stared in surprise. "Scarecrow! Me?. On Earth I'm considered a very pretty girl. I can get away with things like this, disturbing people, because I'm pretty."

"This is Abercrombie Station," said Earl in a dry voice. "Thank God!"

"You're rather handsome yourself," said Jean tentatively.

Earl sat up, his face tinged with angry blood. "Get out of here!" he shouted. "You're discharged!"

"Pish," said Jean. "You wouldn't dare fire me."

"I wouldn't dare?" asked Earl in a dangerous voice. "Why wouldn't I dare?"

"Because I'm smarter than you are."

Earl made a husky sound in his throat. "And just what makes you think so?"

Jean laughed. "You'd be very nice, Earl, if you weren't so touchy."

"All right, we'll take that up first. Why am I so touchy?"

Jean shrugged. "I said you were nice-looking and you blew a skull-fuse." She blew an imaginary fluff from the back of her hand. "I call that touchiness."

Earl wore a grim smile that made Jean think of Fotheringay. Earl might be tough if pushed far enough. But not as tough as—well, say Ansel Clellan. Or Fiorenzo. Or Party MacClure. Or Fotheringay. Or herself, for that matter.

He was staring at her, as if he were seeing her for the first time. This is what she wanted. "Why do you think you're smarter, then?"

"Oh, I don't know . . . Are you smart?"

His glance darted off to the doors leading to his study; a momentary quiver of satisfaction crossed his face. "Yes, I'm smart."

"Can you play chess?"

"Of course I can play chess," he said belligerently. "I'm one of the best chess players alive."

"I could beat you with one hand." Jean had played chess four times in her life.

"I wish you had something I wanted," he said slowly. "I'd take it away from you."

Jean gave him an arch look. "Let's play for forfeits."

"No!"

"Ha!" She laughed, eyes sparkling.

He flushed. "Very well."

Jean picked up her duster. "Not now, though." She had accomplished more than she had hoped for. She looked ostentatiously over her shoulder. "I've got to work. If Mrs. Blaiskell finds me here she'll accuse you of seducing me."

He snorted with twisted lips. He looked like an angry blond boar, thought Jean. But two million dollars was two million dollars. And it wasn't as bad as if he'd been fat. The idea had been planted in his mind. "You be thinking of the forfeit," said Jean. "I've got to work."

She left the room, turning him a final glance over her shoulder which she hoped was cryptic.

THE servant's quarters were in the main cylinder, the Abercrombie Station proper. Jean sat quietly in a corner of the mess-hall, watching and listening while the other servants had their elevenses: cocoa gobbed heavy with whipped cream, pastries, ice-cream. The talk was high-pitched, edgy. Jean wondered at the myth that fat people were languid and easy-going.

From the corner of her eye she saw Mr. Webbard float into the room, his face tight and gray with anger.

She lowered her head over her cocoa, watching him from under her lashes.

Webbard looked directly at her, his lips sucked in and his bulbous cheeks quivered. For a moment it seemed that he would drift at her, attracted by the force of his anger alone; somehow he restrained himself. He looked around the room until he spied Mrs. Blaiskell. A flick of his fingers sent him to where she sat at the end table, held by magnets appropriately fastened to her rompers.

He bent over her, muttered in her ear. Jean could not hear his words, but she

saw Mrs. Blaiskell's face change and her eyes go seeking around the room.

Mr. Webbard completed his dramatization and felt better. He wiped the palms of his hands along the ample area of his dark blue corduroy trousers, twisted with a quick wriggle of his shoulders, and sent himself to the door with a flick of his toe.

Marvellous, thought Jean, the majesty, the orbital massiveness of Webbard's passage through the air. The full moon-face, heavy-lidded, placid; the rosy cheeks, the chins and jowls puffed round and tumescent, glazed and oily, without blemish, mar or wrinkle; the hemisphere of the chest, then the bifurcate lower half, in the rich dark blue corduroy: the whole marvel coasting along with the inexorable momentum of an ore barge. . . .

Jean became aware that Mrs. Blaiskell was motioning to her from the doorway, making cryptic little signals with her fat fingers.

Jean pushed herself across the room, followed Mrs. Blaiskell through the door.

Mrs. Blaiskell was waiting in the little vestibule she called her office, her face scene to shifting emotions. "Mr. Webbard has given me some serious information," she said in a voice intended to be stern.

Jean displayed alarm. "About me?"

Mrs. Blaiskell nodded decisively. "Mr. Earl complained of some very strange behavior this morning. At seven o'clock or earlier. . . ."

Jean gasped. "Is it possible that Earl has had the audacity to—"

"*Mr.* Earl," Mrs. Blaiskell corrected primly.

"Why, Mrs. Blaiskell, it was as much as my life was worth to get away from him!"

Mrs. Blaiskell blinked uneasily. "That's not precisely the way Mr. Webbard put it. He said you—"

"Does that sound reasonable? Is that likely, Mrs. B?"

"Well—no," Mrs. Blaiskell admitted, putting her hand to her chin, and tapping her teeth with a fingernail. "Certainly it seems odd, come to consider a little more closely." She looked at Jean. "But how is it that—"

"He called me into his room, and then —" Jean had never been able to cry, but she hid her face in her hands.

"There, now," said Mrs. Blaiskell. "I never believed Mr. Webbard anyway. Did he—did he—" she found herself unable to phrase the question.

Jean shook her head. "It wasn't for want of trying."

"Just goes to show," muttered Mrs. Blaiskell. "And I thought he'd grown out of that nonsense."

"Nonsense?" The word had been invested with a certain overtone that set it out of context.

Mrs. Blaiskell was embarrassed. She shifted her eyes. "Earl has passed through several stages, and I'm not sure which has been the most troublesome . . . A year or two ago—two years, because this was while Hugo was still alive and the family was together—he saw so many Earth films that he began to admire Earth women, and it had us all worried. Thank Heaven, he's completely thrown off that unwholesomeness, but it's gone to make him all the more shy and self-conscious." She sighed. "If only one of the pretty girls of the station would love him for himself, for his brilliant mind . . . But no, they're all romantic and they're more taken by a rich round body and fine flesh, and poor gnarled Earl is sure that when one of them does smile his way she's after his money, and very likely true, so I say!" She looked at Jean speculatively. "It just occurred to me that Earl might be veering back to his old—well, strangeness. Not that you're not a nice well-meaning creature, because you are."

"Well, well," said Jean dispiritedly. Evidently she had achieved not so much this morning as she had hoped. But then, every campaign had its setbacks.

"In any event, Mr. Webbard has asked that I give you different duties, to keep you from Mr. Earl's sight, because he's

evidently taken an antipathy to you . . . And after this morning I'm sure you'll not object."

"Of course not," said Jean absently. Earl, that bigoted, warped wretch of a boy!

"For today, you'll just watch the Pleasaunce and service the periodicals and water the atrium plants. Tomorrow—well, we'll see."

Jean nodded, and turned to leave. "One more thing," said Mrs. Blaiskell in a hestitant voice. Jean paused. Mrs. Blaiskell could not seem to find the right words.

They came in a sudden surge, all strung together. "Be a little careful of yourself, especially when you're alone near Mr. Earl. This is Abercrombie Station, you know, and he's Earl Abercrombie, and the High Justice, and some very strange things happen. . . ."

Jean said in a shocked whisper, "Physical violence, Mrs. Blaiskell?"

Mrs. Blaiskell stammered and blushed. "Yes, I suppose you'd call it that . . . Some very disgraceful things have come to light. Not nice, though I shouldn't be saying it to you, who's only been with us a day. But, be careful. I wouldn't want your soul on my conscience."

"I'll be careful," said Jean in a properly hushed voice.

Mrs. Blaiskell nodded her head, an indication that the interview was at an end.

JEAN returned to the refectory. It was really very nice for Mrs. Blaiskell to worry about her. It was almost as if Mrs. Blaiskell were fond of her. Jean sneered automatically. That was too much to expect. Women always disliked her because their men were never safe when Jean was near. Not that Jean consciously flirted—at least, not always—but there was something about her that interested men, even the old ones. They paid lip-service to the idea that Jean was a child, but their eyes wandered up and down, the way a young man's eyes wandered.

But out here on Abercrombie Station it was different. Ruefully Jean admitted that no one was jealous of her, no one on the entire station. It was the other way around; she was regarded as an object for pity. But it was still nice of Mrs. Blaiskell to take her under her wing; it gave Jean a pleasant warm feeling. Maybe if and when she got hold of that two million dollars—and her thoughts went to Earl. The warm feeling drained from her mind.

Earl, hoity-toity Earl, was ruffled because she had disturbed his rest. So bristle-necked Earl thought she was gnarled and stunted! Jean pulled herself to the chair. Seating herself with a thumb, she seized up her bulb of cocoa and sucked at the spout.

Earl! She pictured him: the sullen face, the kinky blond hair, the over-ripe mouth, the stocky body he so desperately yearned to fatten. This was the man she must inveigle into matrimony. On Earth, on almost any other planet in the human universe it would be child's play—

This was Abercrombie Station!

She sipped her cocoa, considering the problem. The odds that Earl would fall in love with her and come through with a legitimate proposal seemed slim. Could he be tricked into a position where in order to save face or reputation he would be forced to marry her? Probably not. At Abercrombie Station, she told herself, marriage with her represented almost the ultimate loss of face. Still, there were avenues to be explored. Suppose she beat Earl at chess, could she make marriage the forfeit? Hardly. Earl would be too sly and dishonorable to pay up. It was necessary to make him *want* to marry her, and that would entail making herself desirable in his eyes, which in turn made necessary a revision of Earl's whole outlook. To begin with, he'd have to feel that his own person was not entirely loathesome (although it was). Earl's morale must be built up to a point where he felt himself superior to the rest of Abercrombie Station, and where he would be proud to marry

one of his own kind.

A possibility at the other pole: if Earl's self-respect were so utterly blasted and reduced, if he could be made to feel so despicable and impotent that he would be ashamed to show his face outside his room, he might marry her as the best bet in sight . . . And still another possibility: revenge. If Earl realized that the fat girls who flattered him were actually ridiculing him behind his back, he might marry her from sheer spite.

One last possibility. Duress. Marriage or death. She considered poisons and antidotes, diseases and cures, a straight-forward gun in the ribs . . .

Jean angrily tossed the empty cocoa bulb into the waste hopper. Trickery, sex lure, flattery, browbeating, revenge, fear—which was the most far-fetched? All were ridiculous.

She decided she needed more time, more information. Perhaps Earl had a weak spot she could work on. If they had a community of interests, she'd be much farther advanced. Examination of his study might give her a few hints.

A bell chimed, a number dropped on a call-board and a voice said, "Pleasaunce."

Mrs. Blaiskell appeared. "That's you, miss. Now go in, nice as you please, and ask Mrs. Clara what it is that's wanted, and then you can go off duty till three."

VI

MRS. CLARA ABERCROMBIE, however, was not present. The Pleasaunce was occupied by twenty or thirty young folk, talking and arguing with rather giddy enthusiasm. The girls wore pastel satins, velvets, gauzes, tight around their rotund pink bodies, with frothing little ruffles and anklets, while the young men affected elegant dark grays and blues and tawny beiges, with military trim of white and scarlet.

Ranged along a wall were a dozen stage settings in miniature. Above, a ribbon of paper bore the words "Pandora in Elis. Libretto by A. Percy Stevanic, music by Colleen O'Casey."

Jean looked around the room to see who had summoned her. Earl raised his finger peremptorily. Jean walked on her magnetic shoes to where he floated near one of the miniature stage sets. He turned to a mess of cocoa and whipped cream, clinging like a tumor to the side of the set—evidently a broken bulb.

"Clean up that spill," said Earl in a flinty voice.

Jean thought, he half-wants to rub it in, half-wants to act as if he doesn't recognize me. She nodded dutifully. "I'll get a container and a sponge."

When she returned, Earl was across the room, talking earnestly to a girl whose globular body was encased in a gown of brilliant rose velvet. She wore rose-buds over each ear and played with a ridiculous little white dog while she listened to Earl with a half-hearted affectation of interest.

Jean worked as slowly as possible, watching from the corners of her eyes. Snatches of conversation reached her: "Lapwill's done simply a marvelous job on the editing, but I don't see that he's given Myras the same *scope*—" "—if the pageant grosses ten thousand dollars, Mrs. Clara says she'll put another ten thousand toward the construction fund. Think of it!—A Little Theater all our own!" Excited and conspiratorial whispers ran through the Pleasaunce, "—and for the water scene why not have the chorus float across the sky as moons?"

Jean watched Earl. He hung on the fat girl's words, and spoke with a pathetic attempt at intimate comradeship and jocularity. The girl nodded politely, twisted her features into a smile. Jean noticed her eyes followed a hearty youth whose physique bulged out his plum-colored breeches like wind bellying a spinnaker. Earl perceived the girl's inattention. Jean saw him falter momentarily, then work even harder at his badinage. The fat girl licked her lips, swung her ridiculous little dog on its

leash, and glanced over to where the purple-trousered youth bellowed with laughter.

A sudden idea caused Jean to hasten her work. Earl no doubt would be occupied here until lunch time—two hours away. And Mrs. Blaiskell had relieved her from duty till three.

She took herself from the hall, disposed of the cleaning equipment, dove up the corridor to Earl's private chambers.

At Mrs. Clara's suite she paused, listening at the door. Snores!

Another fifty feet to Earl's chambers. She looked quickly up and down the corridor, slid back the door and slipped cautiously inside.

The room was silent as Jean made a quick survey. Closet, dressing room to one side, sun-flooded bathroom to the other.

Across the room was the tall gray door into the study. A sign hung across the door, apparently freshly made.

"PRIVATE. DANGER. DO NOT ENTER."

Jean paused to consider. What kind of danger? Earl might have set devious safeguards over his private chamber.

She examined the door-slide button. It was overhung by an apparently innocent guard—which might or might not control an alarm circuit. She pressed her belt-buckle against the shutter in such a way as to maintain an electrical circuit, then moved the guard aside, pressed the button with her fingernail —gingerly. She knew of buttons which darted out hypodermics when pressed.

There was no whisper of machinery. The door remained in place.

Jean blew fretfully between her teeth. No keyhole, no buttons to play a combination on . . . Mrs. Blaiskell had found no trouble. Jean tried to reconstruct her motions. She moved to the slide, set her head to where she could see the reflection of the light from the wall . . . There was a smudge on the gloss. She looked closely and a tell-tale glint indicated a photo-electric eye.

She put her finger on the eye, pressed the slide-button. The door slipped open. In spite of having been fore-warned, Jean recoiled from the horrid black shape which hung forward as if to grapple her.

She waited. After a moment the door fell gently back into place.

Jean returned to the outer corridor, stationed herself where she could duck into Mrs. Clara's apartments if a suspicious shape came looming up the corridor. Earl might not have contented himself with the protection of a secret electric lock.

Five minutes passed. Mrs. Clara's personal maid passed by, a globular little Chinese, eyes like two shiny black beetles, but no one else.

Jean pushed herself back to Earl's room, crossed to the study door. Once more she read the sign:

"PRIVATE. DANGER. DO NOT ENTER."

She hestitated. "I'm sixteen years old. Going on seventeen. Too young to die. It's just like that odd creature to furnish his study with evil tricks." She shrugged off the notion. "What a person won't do for money."

She opened the door, slipped through.

THE door closed behind her. Quickly she moved out from under the poised demon-shape and turned to examine Earl's sanctum. She looked right, left, up, down.

"There's a lot to see here," she muttered. "I hope Earl doesn't run out of sheep's-eyes for his fat girl, or decide he wants a particular newspaper clipping . . ."

She turned power into her slipper magnets, and wondered where to begin. The room was more like a warehouse or museum than a study, and gave the impression of wild confusion arranged, sorted, and filed by an extraordinary finicky mind.

After a fashion it was a beautiful room, imbued with an atmosphere of erudition in its dark wood-tones. The far wall glowed molten with rich color —a rose window from the old Chartres cathedral, in full effulgence under the glare of free-space sunlight.

"Too bad Earl ran out of outside wall," said Jean. "A collection of stained glass windows runs into a lot of wall space, and one is hardly a collection . . . Perhaps there's another room . . ." For the study, large as it was, apparently occcupied only half the space permitted by the dimensions of Earl's suite. "But —for the moment—I've got enough here to look at."

Racks, cases, files, walnut and leaded-glass cabinets surfaced the walls; glass-topped displays occupied the floor. To her left was a battery of tanks. In the first series swam eels, hundreds of eels: Earth eels, eels from the outer worlds. She opened a cabinet. Chinese coins hung on pegs, each documented with crabbed boyish hand-writing.

She circled the room, marvelling at the profusion.

There were rock crystals from forty-two separate planets, all of which appeared identical to Jean's unpracticed eye.

There were papyrus scrolls, Mayan codices, medieval parchments illuminated with gold and Tyrian purple, Ogham runes on mouldering sheepskin, clay cylinders incised with cuneiform.

Intricate wood-carvings — fancy chains, cages within cages, amazing interlocking spheres, seven vested Brahmin temples.

Centimeter cubes containing samples of every known element. Thousands of postage stamps, mounted on leaves swung out of a circular cabinet.

There were volumes of autographs of famous criminals, together with their photographs and Bertillon and Pevetsky measurements. From one corner came the rich aromas of perfumes—a thousand little flagons minutely described and coded, together with the index and code explanation, and these again had their origin on a multitude of worlds. There were specimens of fungus growths from all over the universe, and there were racks of minature phonograph records, an inch across, microformed from the original pressings.

She found photographs of Earl's every day of life, together with his weight, height and girth measurement in crabbed handwriting, and each picture bore a colored star, a colored square, and either a red or blue disk. By this time Jean knew the flavor of Earl's personality. Near at hand there would be an index and explanation. She found it, near the camera which took the pictures. The disks referred to bodily functions; the stars, by a complicated system she could not quite comprehend, described Earl's morale, his frame of mind. The colored squares recorded his love life. Jean's mouth twisted in a wry grin. She wandered aimlessly on, fingering the physiographic globes of a hundred planets and examining maps and charts.

The cruder aspects of Earl's personality were represented in a collection of pornographic photographs, and near at hand an easel and canvas where Earl was composing a lewd study of his own. Jean pursed her mouth primly. The prospect of marrying Earl was becoming infinitely less enchanting.

She found an alcove filled with little chess-boards, each set-up in a game. A numbered card and record of moves was attached to each board. Jean picked up the inevitable index book, and glanced through. Earl played postcard chess with opponents all over the Universe. She found his record of wins and losses. He was slightly but not markedly a winner. One man, William Angelo of Toronto, beat him consistently. Jean memorized the address, reflecting that if Earl ever took up her challenge to play chess, now she knew how to beat him. She would embroil Angelo in a game, and send Earl's moves to Angelo as her own and play Angelo's return moves against

Earl. It would be somewhat circuitous and tedious, but fool-proof—almost.

She continued her tour of the study. Sea-shells, moths, dragon-flies, fossil trilobites, opals, torture implements, shrunken human heads. If the collection represented bona fide learning, thought Jean, it would have taxed the time and ability of any four Earth geniuses. But the hoard was essentially mindless and mechanical, nothing more than a boy's collection of college pennants or signs or match-box covers on a vaster scale.

One of the walls opened out into an ell, and here was communication via a freight hatch to outside space. Unopened boxes, crates, cases, bundles—apparently material as yet to be filed in Earl's rookery—filled the room. At the corner another grotesque and monumental creature hung poised, as if to clutch at her, and Jean felt strangely hesitant to wander within its reach. This one stood about eight feet tall. It wore the shaggy coat of a bear and vaguely resembled a gorilla, although the face was long and pointed, peering out from under the fur like that of a French poodle's.

Jean thought of Fotheringay's reference to Earl as an "eminent zoologist." She looked around the room. The stuffed animals, the tanks of eels, Earth tropical fish and Maniacan polywriggles were the only zoological specimens in sight. Hardly enough to qualify Earl as a zoologist. Of course, there was an annex to the room . . . She heard a sound. A click at the outer door.

JEAN dove behind the stuffed animal, heart thudding in her throat. With exasperation she told herself, "He's an eighteen-year-old boy . . . If I can't face him down, out-argue, out-think, out-fight him, and come out on top generally, then it's time for me to start crocheting table-mats for a living." Nevertheless, she remained hidden.

Earl stood quietly in the doorway. The door swung shut behind him. His face was flushed and damp, as if he had just recovered from anger or embarrassment. His delft-blue eyes gazed unseeingly down the roof, gradually came into focus.

He frowned, glanced suspiciously right and left, sniffed. Jean made herself small behind the shaggy fur. *Could* he smell her?

He coiled up his legs, kicked against the wall, dove directly toward her. Under the creature's arm she saw him approaching, bigger, bigger, bigger, arms at his sides, head turned up like a diver. He thumped against the hairy chest, put his feet to ground, stood not six feet distant.

He was muttering under his breath. She heard him plainly. "Damnable insult . . . If she only *knew! Hah!*" He laughed a loud scornful bark. "*Hah!*"

Jean relaxed with a near-audible sigh. Earl had not seen her, and did not suspect her presence.

He whistled aimlessly between his teeth, indecisively. At last he walked to the wall, reached behind a bit of ornate fretwork. A panel swung aside, a flood of bright sunlight poured through the opening into the study.

Earl was whistling a tuneless cadence. He entered the room but did not shut the door. Jean darted from behind her hiding place, looked in, swept the room with her eyes. Possibly she gasped.

Earl was standing six feet away, reading from a list. He looked up suddenly, and Jean felt the brush of his eyes.

He did not move . . . Had he seen her?

For a moment he made no sound, no stir. Then he came to the door, stood staring up the study, and held this position for ten or fifteen seconds. From behind the stuffed gorilla-thing Jean saw his lips move, as if he were silently calculating.

She licked her lips, thinking of the inner room.

He went out into the alcove, among the unopened boxes and bales. He pulled up several, floated them toward the open door, and they drifted into the flood of sunshine. He pushed other bundles aside,

found what he was seeking, and sent another bundle after the rest.

He pushed himself back to the door, where he stood suddenly tense, nose dilated, eyes keen, sharp. He sniffed the air. His eyes swung to the stuffed monster. He approached it slowly, arms hanging loose from his shoulders.

He looked behind, expelled his breath in a long drawn hiss, grunted. From within the annex Jean thought. "He can either smell me or it's telepathy!" She had darted into the room while Earl was fumbling among the crates, and ducked under a wide divan. Flat on her stomach she watched Earl's inspection of the stuffed animal, and her skin tingled. "He smells me, he feels me, he senses me."

Earl stood in the doorway, looking up and down the study. Then he carefully, slowly, closed the door, threw a bolt home, turned to face into the inner room.

For five minutes he busied himself with his crates, unbundling, arranging the contents, which seemed to be bottles of white powder, on shelves.

Jean pushed herself clear of the floor, up against the under side of the divan, and moved to a position where she could see without being seen. Now she understood why Fotheringay had spoken of Earl as an "eminent zoologist."

There was another word which would fit him better, an unfamiliar word which Jean could not immediately dredge out of her memory. Her vocabulary was no more extensive than any girl of her own age, but the word had made an impression.

Teratology. That was the word. Earl was a teratologist.

Like the objects in his other collections, the monsters were only such creatures as lent themselves to ready, almost haphazard, collecting. They were displayed in glass cabinets. Panels at the back screened off the sunlight, and at absolute zero, the things would remain preserved indefinitely, without taxidermy or embalming.

They were a motley, though monstrous group. There were true human monsters, macro- and micro-cephalics, hermaphrodites, creatures with multiple limbs and with none, creatures sprouting tissues like buds on a yeast cell, twisted hoop-men, faceless, t h i n g s, things green, blue and gray.

And then there were other specimens equally hideous, but possibly normal in their own environment: the miscellaneity of a hundred life-bearing planets.

To Jean's eyes, the ultimate travesty was a fat man, displayed in a place of prominence! Possibly he had gained the conspicuous position on his own merits. He was corpulent to a degree Jean had not considered possible. Beside him Webbard might show active and athletic. Take this creature to Earth, he would slup like a jelly-fish. Out here on Abercrombie he floated free, bloated and puffed like the throat of a singing frog! Jean looked at his face—looked again! Tight blond curls on his head. . . .

Earl yawned, stretched. He proceeded to remove his clothes. Stark naked he stood in the middle of the room. He looked slowly, sleepily along the ranks of his collection.

He made a decision, moved languidly to one of the cubicles. He pulled a switch.

Jean heard a faint musical hum, a hissing, smelled heady ozone. A moment passed. She heard a sigh of air. The inner door of a glass cubicle opened. The creature within, moving feebly, drifted out into the room. . . .

Jean pressed her lips tight together; after a moment looked away.

Marry Earl? She winced. No, Mr. Fotheringay. You marry him yourself, you're as able as I am . . . Two million dollars? She shuddered. Five million sounded better. For five million she might marry him. But that's as far as it would go. She'd put on her own ring, there'd be no kissing of the bride. She was Jean Parlier, no plaster saint. But enough was enough, and this was too much.

VII

PRESENTLY Earl left the room. Jean lay still, listened. No sound came from outside. She must be careful. Earl would surely kill her if he found her here. She waited five minutes. No sound, no motion reached her. Cautiously she edged herself out from under the divan.

The sunlight burnt her skin with a pleasant warmth, but she hardly felt it. Her skin seemed stained; the air seemed tainted and soiled her throat, her lungs. She wanted a bath . . . Five million dollars would buy lots of baths. Where was the index? Somewhere would be an index. There had to be an index . . . Yes. She found it, and quickly consulted the proper entry. It gave her much meat for thought.

There was also an entry describing the revitalizing mechanism. She glanced at it hurriedly, understanding little. Such things existed, she knew. Tremendous magnetic fields streamed through the protoplasm, gripping and binding tight each individual atom, and when the object was kept at absolute zero, energy expenditure dwindled to near-nothing. Switch off the clamping field, kick the particles back into motion with a penetrating vibration, and the creature returned to life.

She returned the index to its place, pushed herself to the door.

No sound came from outside. Earl might be writing or coding the events of the day on his photograph . . . Well, so then? She was not helpless. She opened the door, marched boldly through.

The study was empty!

She dove to the outer door, listened. A faint sound of running water reached her ears. Earl was in the shower. This would be a good time to leave.

She pushed the door slide. The door snapped open. She stepped out into Earl's bedroom, pushed herself across to the outer door.

Earl came out of the bathroom, his stocky fresh-skinned torso damp with water.

He stood stock-still, then hastily draped a towel around his middle. His face suddenly went mottled red and pink. "What are you doing in here?"

Jean said sweetly, "I came to check on your linen, to see if you needed towels."

He made no answer, but stood watching her. He said harshly, "Where have you been this last hour?"

Jean made a flippant gesture. "Here, there. Were you looking for me?"

He took a stealthy step forward. "I've a good mind to—"

"To what?" Behind her she fumbled for the door-slide.

"To—"

The door opened.

"Wait," said Earl. He pushed himself forward.

Jean watched him approach. "Well?"

"There's something I want to talk to you about."

Jean slipped out into the corridor, a foot ahead of Earl's hands.

"Come back in," said Earl, making a clutch for her.

From behind them Mrs. Blaiskell said in a horrified voice, "Well, I never! Mr. Earl!" She had appeared from Mrs. Clara's room.

Earl backed into his room hissing unvoiced curses. Jean looked in after him. "The next time you see me, you'll wish you'd played chess with me."

"Jean!" barked Mrs. Blaiskell.

Earl asked in a hard voice, "What do you mean?"

Jean had no idea what she meant. Her mind raced. Better keep her ideas to herself. "I'll tell you tomorrow morning." She laughed mischievously. "About six or six-thirty."

"Miss Jean!" cried Mrs. Blaiskell angrily. "Come away from that door this instant!"

JEAN calmed herself in the servant's refectory with a pot of tea.

Webbard came in, fat, pompous, and

fussy as a hedgehog. He spied Jean and his voice rose to a reedy oboe tone. "Miss, miss!"

Jean had a trick she knew to be effective, thrusting out her firm young chin, squinting, charging her voice with metal. "Are you looking for me?"

Webbard said, "Yes. I certainly am. Where on earth—"

"Well, I've been looking for you. Do you want to hear what I'm going to tell you in private or not?"

Webbard blinked. "Your tone of voice is impudent, miss. If you please—"

"Okay," said Jean. "Right here then. First of all, I'm quitting. I'm going back to Earth. I'm going to see—"

Webbard held up his hand in alarm, looked around the refectory. Conversation along the tables had come to a halt. A dozen curious eyes were watching.

"I'll interview you in my office," said Webbard.

The door slid shut behind her. Webbard pressed his rotundity into a chair; magnetic strands in his trousers held him in place. "Now what is all this? I'll have you know there've been serious complaints."

Jean said disgustedly, "Tie a can to it, Webbard. Talk sense."

Webbard was thunderstruck. "You're an impudent minx—"

"Look. Do you want me to tell Earl how I landed this job?"

Webbard's face quivered. His mouth fell open; he blinked four or five times rapidly. "You wouldn't dare to—"

Jean said patiently, "Forget the master-slave routine for five minutes, Webbard. This is man-to-man talk."

"What do you want?"

"I've a few questions I want to ask you."

"Well?"

"Tell me about old Mr. Abercrombie, Mrs. Clara's husband."

"There's nothing to tell. Mr. Justus was a very distinguished gentleman."

"He and Mrs. Clara had how many children?"

"Seven."

"And the oldest inherits the station?"

"The oldest, always the oldest. Mr. Justus believed in firm organization. Of course the other children were guaranteed a home here at the station, those who wished to stay."

"And Hugo was the oldest. How long after Mr. Justus did he die?"

Webbard found the conversation distasteful. "This is all footling nonsense," he growled in a deep voice.

"How long?"

"Two years."

"And what happened to him?"

Webbard said briskly. "He had a stroke. Cardiac complaint. Now what's all this I hear about your quitting?"

"How long ago?"

"Ah—two years."

"And then Earl inherited."

Webbard pursed his lips. "Mr. Lionel unfortunately was off the station, and Mr. Earl became legal master."

"Rather nice timing, from Earl's viewpoint."

Webbard puffed out his cheeks. "Now then, young lady, we've had enough of that! If—"

"Mr. Webbard, let's have an understanding once and for all. Either you answer my questions and stop this blustering or I'll ask someone else. And when I'm done, that someone else will be asking you questions too."

"You insolent little trash!" snarled Webbard.

Jean turned toward the door. Webbard grunted, thrashed himself forward. Jean gave her arm a shake; out of nowhere a blade of quivering glass appeared in her hand.

Webbard floundered in alarm, trying to halt his motion through the air. Jean put up her foot, pushed him in the belly, back toward his chair.

She said, "I want to see a picture of the entire family."

"I don't have any such pictures."

Jean shrugged. "I can go to any public library and dial the Who's-Who." She looked him over coolly, as she coiled her knife. Webbard shrank back in his chair. Perhaps he thought her a homicidal maniac. Well, she wasn't a maniac and she wasn't homicidal either, unless she was driven to it. She asked easily, "Is it a fact that Earl is worth a billion dollars?"

Webbard snorted. "A billion dollars? Ridiculous. The family owns nothing but the station and lives off the income. A hundred million dollars would build another twice as big and luxurious."

"Where did Fotheringay get that figure?" she asked wonderingly.

"I couldn't say," Webbard replied shortly.

"Where is Lionel now?"

Webbard pulled his lips in and out desperately.

"He's—resting somewhere along the Riviera."

"Hm. . . You say you don't have any photographs?"

WEBBARD scratched his chin. "I believe that there's a shot of Lionel. . . Let me see. . . Yes, just a moment." He fumbled in his desk, pawed and peered, and at last came up with a snap-shot. "Mr. Lionel."

Jean examined the photograph with interest. "Well, well." The face in the photograph and the face of the fat man in Earl's zoological collection were the same. "Well, well." She looked up sharply. "And what's his address?"

[*Turn page*]

"I'm sure I don't know," Webbard responded with some return of his mincing dignity.

"Quit dragging your feet, Webbard."

"Oh well — the Villa Passe-temps, Juan-les-pins."

"I'll believe it when I see your address file. Where is it?"

Webbard began breathing hard. "Now see here, young lady, there's serious matters at stake!"

"Such as what?"

"Well—" Webbard lowered his voice, glanced conspiratorially at the walls of the room. "It's common knowledge at the station that Mr. Earl and Mr. Lionel are —well, not friendly. And there's a rumor—a rumor, mind you—that Mr. Earl has hired a well-known criminal to kill Mr. Lionel."

That would be Fotheringay, Jean surmised.

Webbard continued. "So you see, it's necessary that I exercise the utmost caution. . . ."

Jean laughed. "Let's see that file."

Webbard finally indicated a card file. Jean said, "You know where it is; pull it out."

Webbard glumly sorted through the cards. "Here."

The address was: Hotel Atlantide, Apartment 3001. French Colony, Metropolis, Earth.

Jean memorized the address, then stood irresolutely, trying to think of further questions. Webbard smiled slowly. Jean ignored him, stood nibbling her fingertips. Times like this she felt the inadequacy of her youth. When it came to action—fighting, laughing, spying, playing games, making love—she felt complete assurance. But the sorting out of possibilities and deciding which were probable and which irrational, then she felt less than sure. Such as now. . . . Old Webbard, the fat blob, had calmed himself and was gloating. Well, let him enjoy himself. . . . She had to get to Earth. She had to see Lionel Abercrombie. Possibly Fotheringay had been hired to kill him, possibly not. Possibly Fotheringay knew where to find him, possibly not. Webbard knew Fotheringay; probably he had served as Earl's intermediary. Or possibly Webbard was performing some intricate evolutions of his own. It was plain that, now, her interests were joined with Lionel's, rather than Fotheringay's, because marrying Earl was clearly out of the question. Lionel must stay alive. If this meant double-crossing Fotheringay, too bad for Fotheringay. He could have told her more about Earl's "zoological collection" before he sent her up to marry Earl. . . Of course, she told herself, Fotheringay would have no means of knowing the peculiar use Earl made of his specimens.

"Well?" asked Webbard with an unpleasant grin.

"When does the next ship leave for Earth?"

"The supply barge is heading back tonight."

"That's fine. If I can fight off the pilot. You can pay me now."

"Pay you? You've only done a day's work. You owe the station for transportation, your uniform, your meals—"

"Oh, never mind." Jean turned, pulled herself into the corridor, went to her room, packed her belongings.

Mrs. Blaiskell pushed her head through the door. "Oh, there you are. . ." She sniffed. "Mr. Earl has been inquiring for you. He wants to see you at once." It was plain that she disapproved.

"Sure," said Jean. "Right away."

Mrs. Blaiskell departed.

Jean pushed herself along the corridor to the loading deck. The barge pilot was assisting in the loading of some empty metal drums. He saw Jean and his face changed. "You again?"

"I'm going back to Earth with you. You were right. I don't like it here."

The pilot nodded sourly. "This time you ride in the storage. That way neither one of us gets hurt. . . . I couldn't promise a thing if you're up forward."

"Suits me," said Jean. "I'm going aboard."

"Take-off in an hour."

WHEN Jean reached the Hotel Atlantide in Metropolis she wore a black dress and black pumps which she felt made her look older and more sophisticated. Crossing the lobby she kept wary look-out for the house detective. Sometimes they nursed unkind suspicions toward unaccompanied young girls. It was best to avoid the police, keep them at a distance. When they found that she had no father, no mother, no guardian, their minds were apt to turn to some dreary government institution. On several occasions rather extreme measures to ensure her independence had been necessary.

But the Hotel Atlantide detective took no heed of the black-haired girl quietly crossing the lobby, if he saw her at all. The lift attendant observed that she seemed restless, as with either a great deal of pent enthusiasm or nervousness. A porter on the thirtieth floor noticed her searching for an apartment number and mentally labelled her a person unfamiliar with the hotel. A chambermaid watched her press the bell at Apartment 3001, saw the door open, saw the girl jerk back in surprise, then slowly enter the apartment. Strange, thought the chambermaid, and speculated mildly for a few moments. Then she went to recharge the foam dispensers in the public bathrooms and the incident passed from her mind.

The apartment was spacious, elegant, expensive. Windows overlooked Central Gardens and the Morison Hall of Equity behind. The furnishings were the work of a professional decorator, harmonious and sterile; a few incidental objects around the room, however, hinted of a woman's presence. But Jean saw no woman. There was only herself and Fotheringay.

Fotheringay wore subdued gray flannels and a dark necktie. In a crowd of twenty people he would vanish.

After an instant of surprise he stood back. "Come in."

Jean darted glances around the room, half-expecting a fat crumpled body. But possibly Lionel had not been at home, and Fotheringay was waiting.

"Well," he asked, "what brings you here?" He was watching her covertly. "Take a seat."

Jean sank into a chair, chewed at her lip. Fotheringay watched her cat-like. Walk carefully. She prodded her mind. What legitimate excuse did she have for visiting Lionel? Perhaps Fotheringay had expected her to double-cross him... Where was Hammond? Her neck tingled. Eyes were on her neck. She looked around quickly.

Someone in the hall tried to dodge out of sight. Not quickly enough. Inside Jean's brain a film of ignorance broke to release a warm soothing flood of knowledge.

She smiled, her sharp white little teeth showing between her lips. It had been a fat woman whom she had seen in the hall, a very fat woman, rosy, flushed, quivering.

"What are you smiling at?" inquired Fotheringay.

She used his own technique. "Are you wondering who gave me your address?"

"Obviously Webbard."

Jean nodded. "Is the lady your wife?"

Fotheringay's chin raised a hair's-breadth. "Get to the point."

"Very well." She hitched herself forward. There was still a possibility that she was making a terrible mistake, but the risk must be taken. Questions would reveal her uncertainty, diminish her bargaining position. "How much money can you raise—right now? Cash?"

"Ten or twenty thousand."

Her face must have showed disappointment.

"Not enough?"

"No. You sent me on a bum steer."

Fotheringay sat silently.

"Earl would no more make a pass at me than bite off his tongue. His taste in women is—like yours."

Fotheringay displayed no irritation. "But two years ago—"

"There's a reason for that." She raised her eyebrows ruefully. "Not a nice reason."

"Well, get on with it."

"He liked Earth girls because they were freaks. In his opinion, naturally. Earl likes freaks."

Fotheringay rubbed his chin, watching her with blank wide eyes. "I never thought of that."

"Your scheme might have worked out if Earl were halfway right-side up. But I just don't have what it takes."

Fotheringay smiled frostily. "You didn't come here to tell me that."

"No. I know how Lionel Abercrombie can get the station for himself. . . Of course your name is Fotheringay."

"If my name is Fotheringay, why did you come here looking for me?"

Jean laughed, a gay ringing laugh. "Why do you think I'm looking for you? I'm looking for Lionel Abercrombie. Fotheringay is no use to me unless I can marry Earl. I can't. I haven't got enough of that stuff. Now I'm looking for Lionel Abercrombie."

VIII

FOTHERINGAY tapped a well-manicured finger on a well-flannelled knee, and said quietly, "I'm Lionel Abercrombie."

"How do I know you are?"

He tossed her a passport. She glanced at it, tossed it back.

"Okay. Now—you have twenty thousand. That's not enough. I want two million. . . If you haven't got it, you haven't got it. I'm not unreasonable. But I want to make sure I get it when you do have it. So—you'll write me a deed, a bill of sale, something legal that gives me your interest in Abercrombie Station. I'll agree to sell it back to you for two million dollars."

Fotheringay shook his head. "That kind of agreement is binding on me but not on you. You're a minor."

Jean said, "The sooner I get clear of Abercrombie the better. I'm not greedy. You can have your billion dollars. I merely want two million. . . Incidentally, how do you figure a billion? Webbard says the whole set-up is only worth a hundred million."

Lionel's mouth twisted in a wintry smile. "Webbard didn't include the holdings of the Abercrombie guests. Some very rich people are fat. The fatter they get, the less they like life on Earth."

"They could always move to another resort station."

Lionel shook his head. "It's not the same atmosphere. Abercrombie is Fatman's world. The one small spot in all the universe where a fat man is proud of his weight."

There was a wistful overtone in his voice. Peculiar, she thought it.

Jean said softly, "And you're lonesome for Abercrombie yourself."

Lionel smiled grimly. "Strange."

Jean shifted in her chair. "Now we'll go to a lawyer. I know a good one. Richard Mycroft. I want this deed drawn up without loopholes. Maybe I'll have to find myself a guardian, a trustee."

"You don't need a guardian."

Jean smiled complacently. "For a fact, I don't."

"You still haven't told me what this project consists of."

"I'll tell you when I have the deed. You don't lose a thing giving away property you don't own. And after you give it away, it's to my interest to help you get it."

Lionel rose to his feet. "It had better be good."

"It will be."

The fat woman came into the room. She was obviously an Earth girl, bewildered and delighted by Lionel's attentions. Looking at Jean her face became clouded with jealousy.

Out in the corridor Jean said wisely, "You get her up to Abercrombie, she'll be throwing you over for one of those fat rascals."

"Shut up!" said Lionel, in a voice like the whetting of a scythe.

THE pilot of the supply barge said sullenly, "I don't know about this."

Lionel asked quietly, "You like your job?"

The pilot muttered churlishly, but made no further protest. Lionel buckled himself into the seat beside him. Jean, the horse-faced man named Hammond, two elderly men of professional aspect and uneasy manner settled themselves in the cargo hold.

The ship lifted free of the dock, pushed up above the atmosphere, lined out into Abercrombie's orbit.

The station floated ahead, glinting in the sunlight.

The barge landed on the cargo deck, the handlers tugged it into its socket, the port sighed open.

"Come on," said Lionel. "Make it fast. Let's get it over with." He tapped Jean's shoulder. "You're first."

She led the way up the main core. Fat guests floated down past them, light and round as soap-bubbles, their faces masks of surprise at the sight of so many bone-people.

Up the core, along the vinculum into the Abercrombie private sphere. They passed the Pleasaunce, where Jean caught a glimpse of Mrs. Clara, fat as a blutwurst, with the obsequious Webbard.

They passed Mrs. Blaiskell. "Why, Mr. Lionel!" she gasped. "Well, I never, I never!"

Lionel brushed past. Jean, looking over her shoulder into his face, felt a qualm. Something dark smouldered in his eyes. Triumph, malice, vindication, cruelty. Something not quite human. If nothing else, Jean was extremely human, and was wont to feel uneasy in the presence of outworld life. . . She felt uneasy now.

"Hurry," came Lionel's voice. "Hurry."

Past Mrs. Clara's chambers, to the door of Earl's bedroom. Jean pressed the button; the door slid open.

Earl stood before a mirror, tying a red and blue silk cravat around his bull-neck. He wore a suit of pearl-gray gabardine, cut very full and padded to make his body look round and soft. He saw Jean in the mirror, behind her the hard face of his brother Lionel. He whirled, lost his footing, drifted ineffectually into the air.

Lionel laughed. "Get him, Hammond. Bring him along."

Earl stormed and raved. He was the master here, everybody get out. He'd have them all jailed, killed. He'd kill them himself. . .

Hammond searched him for weapons, and the two professional-looking men stood uncomfortably in the background muttering to each other.

"Look here, Mr. Abercrombie," one of them said at last. "We can't be a party to violence. . ."

"Shut up," said Lionel. "You're here as witnesses, as medical men. You're being paid to look, that's all. If you don't like what you see, that's too bad." He motioned to Jean. "Get going."

Jean pushed herself to the study door. Earl called out sharply. "Get away from there, get away! That's private, that's my private study!"

Jean pressed her lips together. It was impossible to avoid feeling pity for poor gnarled Earl. But—she thought of his "zoological collection." Firmly she covered the electric eye, pressed the button. The door swung open, revealing the glory of the stained glass glowing with the fire of heaven.

Jean pushed herself to the furry two-legged animal. Here she waited.

Earl made some difficulty about coming through the door. Hammond manipulated his elbows; Earl belched up a hoarse screech, flung himself forward, panting like a winded chicken.

Lionel said, "Don't fool with Hammond, Earl. He likes hurting people."

The two witnesses muttered wrathfully. Lionel quelled them with a look.

Hammond seized Earl by the seat of the pants, raised him over his head, walked with magnetic shoes gripping the deck across the cluttered floor of the

study, with Earl flailing and groping helplessly.

Jean fumbled in the fretwork over the panel into the annex. Earl screeched, "Keep your hands out of there! Oh, how you'll pay, how you'll pay for this, how you'll pay!" His voice hoarsened, he broke into sobs.

Hammond shook him, like a terrier shaking a rat.

Earl sobbed louder.

The sound grated Jean's ears. She frowned, found the button, pushed. The panel flew open.

They all marched into the bright annex, Earl completely broken, sobbing and pleading.

"There it is," said Jean.

Lionel swung his gaze along the collection of monstrosities. The out-world things, the dragons, basilisks, griffins, the armored insects, the great-eyed serpents, the tangles of muscle, the coiled creatures of fang, brain, cartilage. And then there were the human creatures, no less grotesque and feverish. Lionel's eyes stopped at the fat man.

He looked at Earl, who had fallen numbly silent.

"Poor old Hugo," said Lionel. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Earl."

Earl made a sighing sound.

Lionel said, "But Hugo is dead. . . He's as dead as any of the other things. Right, Earl?" He looked at Jean. "Right?"

"I guess that's right," said Jean uneasily. She found no pleasure baiting Earl.

"Of course he's dead," panted Earl.

Jean went to the little key controlling the magnetic field.

Earl screamed, "You witch! You witch!"

Jean depressed the key. There was a musical hum, a hissing, a smell of ozone. A moment passed. There came a sigh of air. The cubicle opened with a sucking sound. Hugo drifted into the room.

He twitched his arms, gagged and retched, made a thin crying sound in his throat.

Lionel turned to his two witnesses. "Is this man alive?"

They muttered excitedly. "Yes, yes!"

Lionel turned to Hugo. "Tell them your name."

Hugo whispered feebly, pressed his elbows to his body, pulled up his atrophied little legs, tried to assume a foetal position.

Lionel asked the two men, "Is this man sane?"

They fidgeted. "That of course is hardly a matter we can determine offhand." There was further mumbling about tests, cephalographs, reflexes.

Lionel waited a moment. Hugo was gurgling, crying like a baby. "Well—is he sane?"

The doctors said, "He's suffering from severe shock. The deep-freeze classically has the effect of disturbing the synapses—"

Lionel asked sardonically, "Is he in his right mind?"

"Well—no."

Lionel nodded. "In that case—you're looking at the new master of Abercrombie Station."

EARL protested, "You can't get away with that, Lionel! He's been insane a long time, and you've been off the station!"

Lionel grinned wolfishly. "Do you want to take the matter into Admiralty Court at Metropolis?"

Earl fell silent. Lionel looked at the doctors, who were whispering heatedly together.

"Talk to him," said Lionel. "Satisfy yourself whether he's in his right mind or not."

The doctors dutifully addressed Hugo, who made mewing sounds. They came to an uncomfortable but definite decision. "Clearly this man is not able to conduct his own affairs."

Earl pettishly wrenched himself from Hammond's grasp. "Let go of me."

"Better be careful," said Lionel. "I don't think Hammond likes you."

"I don't like Hammond," said Earl

viciously. "I don't like anyone." His voice dropped in pitch. "I don't even like myself." He stood staring into the cubicle which Hugo had vacated.

Jean sensed a tide of recklessness rising in him. She opened her mouth to speak—

But Earl had already started.

Time stood still. Earl seemed to move with bewildering slowness, but the others stood as if frozen in jelly.

Time turned on for Jean. "I'm getting out of here!" she gasped, knowing what the half-crazed Earl was about to do.

Earl ran down the line of his monsters, magnetic shoes slapping on the deck. As he ran, he flipped switches. When he finished he stood at the far end of the room. Behind him things came to life.

Hammond gathered himself, plunged after. A black arm apparently groping at random caught hold of his leg. There was a dull cracking sound. Hammond bawled out in terror.

Jean started through the door. She jerked back, shrieking. Facing her was the eight-foot gorilla thing with the French-poodle face. Somewhere along the line Earl had thrown a switch relieving it from magnetic catalepsy. The black eyes shone, the mouth dripped, the hands clenched and unclenched. Jean shrank back.

There were horrible noises from behind. She heard Earl gasping in sudden fear. But she could not turn her eyes from the gorilla-thing. It drifted into the room. The black dog-eyes looked deep into Jean's. She could not move! A great black arm, groping apparently at random, fell past Jean's shoulder, touched the gorilla-thing.

There was screaming bedlam. Jean pressed herself against the wall. A green flapping creature, coiling and uncoiling, twisted out into the study, smashing racks, screens, displays, sending books, minerals, papers, mechanisms, cases and cabinets floating and crashing. The gorilla-thing came after, one of its arms twisted and loose. A rolling flurry of webbed feet, scales, muscular tail and a human body followed—Hammond and a griffin from a world aptly named "Pest-hole".

Jean darted through the door, thought to hide in the alcove. Outside, on the deck, was Earl's space-boat. She shoved herself across to the port.

Behind, frantically scrambling, came one of the doctors that Lionel had brought along for witnesses.

Jean called, "Over here, over here!"

The doctor threw himself into the space-boat.

Jean crouched by the port, ready to slam it at any approach of danger. . . She sighed. All her hopes, plans, future had exploded. Death, debacle, catastrophe were hers instead.

She turned to the doctor. "Where's your partner?"

"Dead! Oh Lord, oh Lord, what can we do?"

Jean turned her head to look at him, lips curling in disgust. Then she saw him in a new, flattering, light. A disinterested witness. He looked like money. He could testify that for at least thirty seconds Lionel had been master of Abercrombie Station. That thirty seconds was enough to transfer title to her. Whether Hugo were sane or not didn't matter because Hugo had died thirty seconds before the metal frog with the knife-edged scissor-bill had fixed on Lionel's throat.

Best to make sure. "Listen," said Jean. "This may be important. Suppose you were to testify in court. Who died first, Hugo or Lionel?"

The doctor sat quiet a moment. "Why, Hugo! I saw his neck broken while Lionel was still alive."

"Are you sure?"

"Oh yes." He tried to pull himself together. "We must do something."

"Okay," said Jean. "What shall we do?"

"I don't know."

From the study came a gurgling sound, and an instant later, a woman's scream. "God," said Jean. "The things

have gotten out into the inner bedroom... What they won't do to Abercrombie Station. . ." She lost control and retched against the hull of the boat.

A brown face like a poodle-dog's, spotted red with blood, peered around the corner at them. Steathily it pulled itself closer.

Mesmerized, Jean saw that now its arm had been twisted entirely off. It darted forward. Jean fell back, slammed the port. A heavy body thudded against the metal.

They were closed in Earl's space-boat. The man had fainted. Jean said, "Don't die on me, fellow. You're worth money. . . ."

Faintly through the metal came crashing and thumping. Then came the muffled *spatttt* of proton guns.

The guns sounded with monotonous regularity. *Spatttt . . . Spattt . . . spattt . . . spattt . . . spattt. . . .*

Then there was utter silence.

Jean inched open the port. The alcove was empty. Across her vision drifted the broken body of the gorilla-thing.

Jean ventured into the alcove, looked out into the study. Thirty feet distant stood Webbard, planted like a pirate captain on the bridge of his ship. His face was white and wadded; pinched lines ran from his nose around his nearly invisible mouth. He carried two big proton guns; the orifices of both were white-hot.

He saw Jean; his eyes took on a glitter. "You! It's you that's caused all this, your sneaking and spying!"

He jerked up his proton guns.

"No!" cried Jean. "It's not my fault!"

Lionel's voice came weakly. "Put down those guns, Webbard." Clutching his throat he pushed himself into the study. "That's the new owner," he croaked sardonically. "You wouldn't want to murder your boss, would you?"

Webbard blinked in astonishment. "Mr. Lionel!"

"Yes," said Lionel. "Home again. . . And there's quite a mess to clean up, Webbard. . ."

JEAN looked at the bank-book. The figures, burnt into the plastic, spread almost all the way across the tape.

$2,000,000.00.

Mycroft puffed on his pipe, looked out the window.

"There's a matter you should be considering," said Mycroft. "That's the investment of your money. You won't be able to do it by yourself; other parties will insist on dealing with a responsible entity—that is to say, a trustee or a guardian."

"I don't know much about these things," said Jean. "I—rather assumed that you'd take care of them."

Mycroft reached over, tapped the dottle out of his pipe.

"Don't you want to?" asked Jean.

Mycroft said with a compressed distant smile. "Yes, I want to. . . I'll be glad to administer a two million dollar estate. In effect, I'll become your legal guardian, until you're of age. We'll have to get a court order of appointment. The effect of the order will be to take control of the money out of your hands; we can include in the articles, however, a clause guaranteeing you the full income—which I assume is what you want. It should come to—oh, say fifty thousand a year after taxes."

"That suits me," said Jean listlessly. "I'm not too interested in anything right now. . . There seems to be something of a let-down."

Mycroft nodded. "I can see how that's possible."

Jean said, "I have the money. I've always wanted it, now I have it. And now—" she held out her hands, raised her eyebrows. "It's just a number in a bank-book. . . Tomorrow morning I'll get up and say to myself, 'What shall I do today? Shall I buy a house? Shall I order a thousand dollars worth of clothes? Shall I start out on a two year tour of Argo Navis?' And the answer will come out, 'No, the hell with it all.' "

"What you need," said Mycroft, "are some friends, nice girls your own age."

Jean's mouth moved in rather a sick-

ly smile. "I'm afraid we wouldn't have much in common. . . It's probably a good idea, but—it wouldn't work out." She sat passively in the chair, her wide mouth drooping.

Mycroft noticed that in repose it was a sweet generous mouth.

She said in a low voice, "I can't get out of my head the idea that somewhere in the universe I must have a mother and a father. . . ."

Mycroft rubbed his chin. "People who'd abandon a baby in a saloon aren't worth thinking about, Jean."

"I know," she said in a dismal voice. "Oh Mr. Mycroft, I'm so damn lonely. . . ." Jean was crying, her head buried in her arms.

Mycroft irresolutely put his hand on her shoulder, patted awkwardly.

After a moment she said, "You'll think I'm an awful fool."

"No," said Mycroft gruffly. "I think nothing of the kind. I wish that I. . . ." He could not put it into words.

She pulled herself together, rose to her feet. "Enough of this. . ." She turned his head up, kissed his chin. "You're really very nice, Mr. Mycroft. . . But I don't want sympathy. I hate it. I'm used to looking out for myself."

Mycroft returned to his seat, loaded his pipe to keep his fingers busy. Jean picked up her little hand-bag. "Right now I've got a date with a couturier named André. He's going to dress me to an inch of my life. And then I'm going to—" She broke off. "I'd better not tell you. You'd be alarmed and shocked."

He cleared his throat. "I expect I would."

She nodded brightly. "So long." And left his office.

Mycroft cleared his throat again, hitched up his trousers, settled his jacket, returned to his work. . . Somehow it appeared dull, drab, gray. His head ached.

He said, "I feel like going out and getting drunk. . . ."

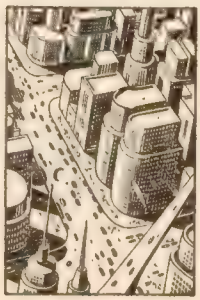
Ten minutes passed. His door opened. Jean looked in.

"Hello, Mr. Mycroft."

"Hello, Jean."

"I changed my mind. I thought it would be nicer if I took you out to dinner, and then maybe we could go to a show. . . Would you like that?"

"Very much," said Mycroft.



FEATURED IN THE NEXT ISSUE

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DOUBLE JEOPARDY

A Detective Mystery of the Future

By FLETCHER PRATT

•

PLUS MANY OTHER STORIES

The STAR MINSTREL

by Walt Sheldon

Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast—whether it be on Terra or Titan!

THE STOWAWAY said his name was Benny, and when Captain Rawlings, looming over him, said, "Benny what?" he smiled back sweetly and said, "Just Benny."

Rawlings turned to me. "All right, Mr. Coulter. We've no brig aboard, but an empty cargo compartment'll do. See that he's confined."

I said, "Excuse me, sir. Couldn't we

use him somewhere? We are light on crew this trip—"

"You heard my order," interjected Rawlings coldly, then turned in that crackwhip way of his and stalked forward, toward control.

I turned to the stowaway. He looked harmless enough. He was little and round and his eyes were like blue glass buttons. His cheeks were pink and cherubic: two dimples held his merry grin in quotes. The only really startling thing about him was his shock of pure white hair. And the little black box. He carried this slung over his shoulder, and it was the music he made with it that had given him away and led to his discovery here among the liferoids. The box was the kind of portable theramin that used to be popular in the last century; in case you've never seen one, it operates by making audible oscillations, and the frequency of these oscillations is changed when the player's hands, waving in the air above the box, alter the capacity of the circuit.

So I half-sighed, "Come on, Benny."

He beamed, and walked beside me. We headed for the crew's quarters, to pass through them, and then go on to the cargo hold. Benny shifted the box around in front of him and began to play softly. And sang. His voice was strangely soothing—almost hypnotic:

> Wait for me, lonely eyes,
> Wait for me in time and space,
> Rockets roar, rockets rise,
> To the stars, where we face —

I asked, "Your own composition?"

"No. An ancient one. Old as a red dwarf star. I heard it first from a keloid-covered spaceman taking the cure on Venus. Dates from the first rocket period, long before space drive—you can tell that from the progressive integer scale. The Mendl theory influenced even music in those days."

I looked at him curiously.

HE LOOKED right back and laughed and said, "Surprised, eh? Didn't expect to hear such erudite spoutings from an old space bum? Well, if it'll help matters, I hold a doctorate in music from the World Government Conservatory. Most promising young musician in decades, they once said. I had perfect pitch, technique, perfect rhythm—ah, well, you wouldn't be interested."

He was wrong. I would be interested, but not just at this minute. Too many other things on my mind. Rawlings had been about to show me the secret orders with our destination and the purpose of our voyage when the discovery of the stowaway interrupted us. I wanted to get back to that as soon as I could get Benny settled. We were already far past Mars Mean Limit, and no routine jump ever went beyond M.M.L. Something, as the saying goes, was cooking. And as if this wasn't enough, the crew a makeshift bunch of malcontents and misfits who had volunteered for "dangerous duty" to get away from whatever they were doing—had been restless and just a little mean-eyed for the past few periods.

I got Benny stowed away in a cargo compartment that was pretty much like a cell, assigned guards and arranged for his meals, and left him there, singing and playing softly, as I hurried forward again.

Captain Rawlings had the microfilmed orders in a Davis reader on his desk. He shoved the reader at me in a characteristically abrupt gesture. I knew what made Rawlings very military like this. In a way he, too, was a malcontent who had volunteered to get away from something. Most of his Space Force career had been spent as commandant of the school at Geneva, and he treated the officers and men of the *Shapley*, his first space command, like a bunch of inexperienced cadets.

"Take it to your quarters and read it carefully, Mr. Coulter," he said. "Meanwhile, I'll give you a rough brief on it. You've heard of Commander Merriman?"

"Yes, sir. He made that ten year charting trip in space, didn't he?"

Rawlings nodded. "Among other places, he landed briefly on Titan, the sixth moon of Saturn. As you'll see from the report there, he believes Titan may be a new and vast source of starfungus."

"What?" I said, surprised.

"I'm sure you heard me, Mr. Coulter," said Rawlings. "Therefore I won't repeat."

I had heard him, of course. But the importance of the news had startled me. I won't go into the technicalities of starfungus, which is neither mineral nor organic, and which cures nearly all infectious diseases. It had been found on a few of the larger asteroids, only in such minute quantity that its cost was practically prohibitive.

"Merriman didn't actually get samples," Rawlings continued, "but his Holt indicators registered an extraordinary concentration. He was forced to blast off again before he could make a proper investigation."

"Forced?"

"Queer form of life—or non-life. Extraordinarily dangerous, at any rate. Large metallic sphere, about twenty feet in diameter that rolled toward them —chased them. It got two of the party. Seemed to absorb them as soon as it touched them. They tried solar blasts on it and couldn't do a thing."

"And we're going to take a second crack at this affair?"

"That," said Rawlings, "is what we volunteered for, Mr. Coulter." He looked at his watch. "In four hours I will expect you to repeat the orders word for word. That's all."

I said, "Yes, sir," saluted, and left.

In my own quarters I found it hard to study. My mind kept wandering: recalling how the *Shapley* had been what a spaceman calls a "sloppy rocket" when we first came aboard. Metal surfaces were unpolished, the crew roamed around in shorts and T-shirts, and nearly every night there was heavy drinking and carousing. Nine out of ten had bad records. It was impossible to guess which of them had smuggled the old space bum and his theramin aboard, but it was a trick that might well have been expected of such an outfit. Rawlings had taken over with an iron hand, barked, turned his cold eye upon them, meted out punishment right and left and whipped them into a slightly more disciplined team. But they hadn't liked it. And Jonathan Rawlings was at the bottom of every man's list.

I HAD regretted volunteering almost from the moment of blast off. Me and my big fat ideas about adventure and excitement.

I memorized the orders then, which didn't add much to what Rawlings had told me, and repeated them for him, and then took my next watch. We were high in space drive now and rapidly approaching Jupiter's Mean Orbit, although Jupiter was way over on the other side of the sun at the moment.

I made my routine check and found that we were three degrees off course. I frowned, called Vronsky, the cosmogator, and we went over his figures. Not a mistake, of course; Vronsky's didn't make mistakes.

"Must be overcorrection in steering blasts," he said.

I agreed. I headed aft to talk about that to Hassler, the Chief Rocket Mate. He was big, blond and barrel chested and he looked me right in the eye and said, "Sure, it was my fault, Mr. Coulter. No excuse."

I looked him back in the eye and said, "An explanation, then?"

He nodded. "I left the dials for a few minutes. Heard Benny singing, and just couldn't resist. The sound came through the door there and I went up to listen. I mean I just had to. You know what I mean, sir?"

I didn't. But since Hassler was an exceptionally good Chief Rocket Mate and had generally kept out of trouble, I let him off with a reprimand.

Two periods later a space rock struck us. It was a terrible jolt and put a big

dent in the outside hull just aft of station twelve. I looked into the cause of that, and found out that Jennings, the ultrawave monitor had been half-asleep at his screen, and hadn't seen the pip as it formed. Why? Well, I got to the bottom of that, too. He'd been up late the previous period. Half the crew had. They'd been gathered around Benny's cell, listening to him play and sing. Just couldn't resist it, they all said.

I went to see Benny.

"Lieutenant," he said. "I can't help it if they have to listen to my music. I tell you, there's a need for music here. That's all it is." He passed his hands over the theramin and floating harmonies came from it. He sang:

I'm weary of the fog and rain of Venus,
I'm sick to death of all the dust of Mars,
The green hills of the earth,
There's where I had my birth,
So take me from the cold and twinkling stars—

There was something about it. I had to admit that I think I might have left my post if I had heard it. There was sorcery in it of some kind. There was a kind of peace, too; in an odd way, and while the song lasted I seemed to feel better about things.

Then Benny waved softly at the black box and talked, and somehow the music was accompaniment to his words. "You wonder why I roam space, waste time on tunes, and stow away in rockets where they drive. I'll tell you why. Because the world, the earth called Terra, has lost its need for music, and I, like all men, must feel that I fulfill a need. Music on earth? It isn't really music any more. It is numbers, triangles and spheres, co-signs and coefficients—logic, cold, clicking logic, tolerant to two ten-thousandths of an inch. And why? Well, we've come so far, that's why. There's too much comfort, too much bland death which we call happiness. Anything can be solved by an equation or a rule of thumb. It's only out here in space where there is danger and despair that man's soul finds a need for music—"

I'm not sure I understood him completely. But I was in a thoughtful mood, deep and uncomfortable, when I returned to the bridge. That disturbed feeling, and the lingering memory of Benny's music, didn't leave for two periods.

But now Saturn was fat in our plates, and we were just about ready for our orbit-in to Titan. Rawlings called the crew together in the chart room for final instructions. They listened quietly while he explained the purpose of the mission, Commander Merriman's report, and the importance of finding a source of starfungus, if there was such a thing.

He didn't minimize the danger, and gave every detail concerning the strange, metallic spheres that were impervious even to solar blasts. "There's evidently some kind of atmosphere on the satellite," he continued, "but it's not breathable. That means space suits. So the closer we land to our target—a certain mountain range where Commander Merriman found the concentration to be highest—the less distance we'll have to travel in uncomfortable gear. Chief Hassler will form the party, and pick two men to stay with the ship. Any questions?"

Hassler stepped forward. He shuffled his feet, frowned and said, "Captain, the boys figured we'd make a landing party and they asked me to speak for 'em."

"Speak about what?" said Rawlings coldly.

"Well, they'd like to have Benny go along."

"What? What's this?" His voice sounded shocked and horrified at the suggestion.

"They want Benny taken out of the brig, sir, so's he can come along and kind o' keep us entertained."

"That's absolutely out of the question. The man is a stowaway and a prisoner," snapped Rawlings.

I stepped forward then. "Just a minute, skipper. I—I think the men have a point. We might run into a long dangerous hike, and Benny would help keep

things on even keel. As a matter of fact, sir—" I glanced at the men—"I have a funny idea that we'd have had trouble before this if it hadn't been for Benny and his music."

Someone from the rear yelled out, "Attaboy, Lieutenant—you tell him!" Someone unidentifiable. There's one in every group. It broke the tension and they laughed a bit.

It broke Rawling's tension somewhat, too. He scowled at the deck plates, then finally looked at me and said, "Well, against my better judgment—"

I grinned then, turned to Hassler and said, "Release the prisoner, Chief, and get your landing party ready."

Hassler said, "Yes, sir!" and gave the snappiest salute the *Shapley* had seen since blast-off.

I went back into control with Rawlings and he glanced at me and said, "I still don't approve of it. Only reason I gave my consent was that I smelled incipient mutiny or insubordination. The mission is too important to risk that." Then he lowered his voice and spoke meaningfully. "I'll not be taking any chances with this Benny, or whatever his name is, on the return trip."

THE significance of the remark didn't hit me for a full five minutes. Rawlings had crossed to the other side of control by then and I was watching the forward view plates. Then, something like a tubful of ice water came over me—it was the realization that Rawlings meant to maroon Benny here on Saturn. I almost staggered back. I turned, looked at the man, and there he was, calmly making notations from the position sphere and setting some of the prepositioning landing controls. I still couldn't believe he meant to leave a man to his certain death, even a stowaway. And yet he'd as much as told me that he intended to do just that.

But he wouldn't do it. Not while I was still around and alive and kicking, he wouldn't. . . .

One whole period later, as I emerged from the forward hatch of the *Shapley*, now nose upright in a wide, rocky valley, I was still determined not to let Captain Jonathan Rawlings out of my sight, or at the very least, keep a hard protective eye on Benny, the stowaway.

We assembled at the base of the ship, fourteen of us, including Benny. He was already running his fingers lightly over the invisible field atop his theramin trying it out in the thin, unbreathable atmosphere. The tiny exterior mikes of our space suits picked up its sound. Captain Rawlings was checking everybody's gear, while another of the men was taking readings from a Holt indicator. Vronsky, the cosmogator, was measuring both Saturn and the sun, consulting tables, and assuring himself for the hundredth time that we had landed on the spot indicated in Merriman's report.

Rawlings, when he finished his inspection, turned to the man with Holt indicator and said, "Well?"

The man pointed toward a group of jagged, conical hills that seemed several miles away, although it was difficult to guess distance in this queer, pale, even light. We heard his voice crackle in our headsets. "She seems to hit maximum over there, sir."

"That's where we'll go, then," he said. And then he turned around and called, just as if he were back in space school, "For-warrrd—HARCH!"

Benny caught the ridiculousness of the thing beautifully. I saw his head move around inside his space helmet as he glanced mischievously about him, and then suddenly he turned up the volume on his theramin, waved his fingers vigorously above it and struck up one of the old-fashioned march tunes they used to play in the days of nationalism and wars.

Everybody laughed until Rawlings turned around and glared, and then they stopped laughing—at least, they stopped laughing audibly. But the spirit of the thing stuck around. The whole squad marched pompously along in its space suits, men glancing at each other and

grinning. The mass adjustments had been pre-set on the space suits of course, so that we were able to march and didn't go bounding several hundred feet up with each step.

After he finished the first corny chorus, Benny modulated to another key and then ad-libbed words to his tune:

There'll be fightin'
Up on Titan,
When we see those rolling spheres.
We'll be in it,
In a minute—
We'll be in it right up to our ears . . .

He couldn't have timed it better. It happened just as he sang "ears."

From a small, fissure-like opening in the conical hills ahead three gleaming bright spheres came rolling. Twenty feet in diameter, Merriman had said. These seemed bigger. And now we saw, too, that we were nearer the hills than we had believed.

They came straight for us, rolling perhaps as fast as tumbleweed before the wind.

"Draw weapons! Commence firing!" commanded Rawlings. He dropped to one knee and drew his own solar pistol. He fired the first bolt. It went off, with the speed of light, making an apparent streak between the muzzle of the weapon and the target. One shot from a solar pistol, as anyone who follows Space Force recruiting films can tell you, will destroy a small mountain, or reduce a skyscraper to dust.

The bolts did nothing, absolutely nothing to the metal spheres.

They did stop rolling toward us however. Momentarily, as if possessed of intelligence, and curious about these bright things that came toward them.

"Hassler!" yelled the captain. "Try those P-grenades!"

"Right," Hassler called back. He came running forward, tugging at the cloth bag slung from his shoulder. He moved ahead of us, big, fearless and I must admit, inspiring. He moved right up to within a few hundred feet of the spheres. He adjusted his pistol for grenade throwing, pointed it and fired.

We slammed flat, all of us.

The P-explosion came—the terrifying, shaking thing, that seems to send you floating a million miles in space temporarily—and then we lifted our heads as all the dust and rubble came down.

The three spheres were still there. Not so much as a dent in any of them.

"Look out, Hassler!" Captain Rawlings yelled suddenly.

One of the spheres was rolling toward him. Picking up speed. Hassler turned and started to run. Then he looked back, and saw it gaining.

The sphere gave a terrific burst of speed, rolled upon him and over him and as we watched, absorbed him before our startled eyes. It was near one of the other men, and in desperation he picked up a loose rock and hurled it at a straight line. We heard it strike the metallic surface. It gave off a high pitched musical *ping!* something like the note of a vibraphone.

The sphere rolled back suddenly to its two companions. The three things rolled about slightly there, more or less in one spot, and bumping each other gently. It was clear that they were communicating, having a sort of conference.

AND then in the next moment they aligned themselves and started to roll slowly and easily toward us.

"Back to the ship!" yelled the captain.

"We'll never make it!" another voice howled. I recognized the same voice that had called out from the back of the chart room. This time, I was afraid, the lad had said a mouthful. We wouldn't make it. We couldn't possibly make it. Those spheres would pick up speed at any moment.

"Take your neutronium out!" I shouted. "Try to make the ship in one jump!" That would be dangerous, I knew, because you couldn't very well control a jump in a gravity field you weren't used to. But I figured it was the best chance we had.

The men leaned down and began to

fumble with the adjusters.

The spheres hurled themselves toward us.

Somebody screamed in terror. It might have been me, for all I know.

And then suddenly I heard a high, loud, singing tone—a flat tone that all but split my eardrums. I whirled in the direction of it. Benny was standing with his feet spread, facing the approaching spheres and holding both hands steadily over the top of the theramin. Just beyond him the spheres came to a sudden stop. I stared at them. They seemed to tremble—rock swiftly back and forth as if oscillating.

Then suddenly, in swift succession, each sphere shattered into thousands of pieces, like glass ornaments dropped from a Christmas tree.

There was nothing left but a dead and motionless spongy core from each sphere.

Benny shut his theramin off abruptly, and the silence was startling.

The voice of the man with the Holt indicator broke it suddenly. "Hey! Captain! She's registering like crazy! It's that spongy stuff!"

It was the spongy stuff, all right. When we analyzed it we found it to be highly concentrated starfungus, and in those three masses enough, as Rawlings said, to cure everybody in the solar system of every infectious disease ever discovered. It took us little more than an hour to load it, and get away from there before any of the other spheres happened to come around.

Rawlings analyzed the little conical hills while that was going on and found concentrations of the growth among the rocks there, so it was probable that the spheres lived on starfungus and absorbed it in some manner as they had absorbed Hassler. We never found a trace of the chief. In some mysterious manner he had been completely digested.

We held services for him as soon as we were in space drive and on the way back.

Afterward Rawlings invited Vronsky and myself and the other two ship's officers to have dinner in his quarters. He also invited Benny and made him sit at the head of the table. He even broke out a bottle of vintage brandy, and joked all through the meal. We stared at each other in amazement! The captain had become positively human.

And then, when we had finished eating and were attacking the last of the brandy, he leaned forward and said to Benny, "Look, old man, I think we all understand how you cracked those metallic things with sympathetic vibration —I've seen it done with a siren and a wine glass. Damn fast thinking, too. But what I don't understand is how—with about one second to figure things out—you knew the exact vibration!"

Benny laughed. "Ever hear of perfect pitch, Captain? About one person in ten thousand is born with it, and they almost always become musicians. I can hear a whole orchestra blast out and tell you exactly what note every instrument is playing. When that fellow threw a rock at the sphere and it went ping! it was a perfect E-flat above high C!"

"Well," said Rawlings, leaning back. "Well, well. Music does have its charms —or its uses, anyway; doesn't it? And to think," he added, "that I was about to do something pretty terrible to you before we left Titan."

I tried to catch the captain's eye and caution him to say nothing. After all, it wouldn't help matters to let Benny know he would have marooned him.

"I was going to do my best," said Rawlings, "to swipe that theramin of yours and leave it back on Titan!"

I gaped, then leaned back, so that was all the captain had hinted at so darkly.

He laughed suddenly and said, "Let's break out another bottle of brandy, and just to make it official, Benny, you get that theramin of yours and start us off on 'Sweet Adeline'!"

It wasn't very successful. Rawlings spoiled it. He not only didn't have perfect pitch, but he couldn't carry a tune in a basket.

"I don't know how I'll do without my Venus babes. . . ."

SOLUTION VITAL

They got what they went after, but— could they get it back to Earth?

TIM SHANNON took off his earphones. "The Seals won it and the series," he said. "Homer by Herrschaft in the eighth. Gosh, when we started out, he was just up from the minors and nobody knew whether he'd make good or not. Remember?"

"A lot of things can change a lot in seven years," said Armand Belandis, a trifle grimly. "And a lot will change a lot more if this turns

By WALTER KUBILIUS and FLETCHER PRATT

out to be another false alarm, like the Yamaguchi strike."

"Oh, cheer up, Belly," said Shannon. He thrust a finger toward the Geiger-Rovere deep-registration counter. "Do you hear the merry chatter coming out of our little friend there? The planet's just loaded with trans-uranium elements. And it's the right size and distance from the sun to give them an extreme half-life. We're famous. What's more, we're rich."

"Don't call me Belly. It may also be loaded with unfriendly forms of life. Or the elements may be in the form of curium or californium, or something else so radioactive we can't carry it home. The only thing that will do us any good is nice, old workable neptunium."

"What if it is curium?" said Shannon. "They'll send a freighter with insulated tanks and pick it up. I think we should send a preliminary report right away and give the boys and girls something to feel good about." He leaned back in his seat, grinned, and whistled the first few bars of "This Is My Lucky Day."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, cut out that noise!" said Belandis, sharply. "I told you before, I will not send a preliminary, and it would be just about the worst thing in the world if people started 'feeling good' as you call it. The readjustment's going to be bad enough as it is, even if we load up the ship with the stuff."

Shannon shrugged. "I just don't get it."

"No, I suppose not. Neither are they going to send any freighter unless we bring home the bacon."

"You speak in riddles, fair sir. Here we are on the edge of success, and you act as though we were about to be hung for it."

"We are." Balandis' mouth worked a trifle, then he glanced at the control panel to make certain everything was set on full automatic and stood up. "Look here, Tim, I'm not supposed to show top priority communications to a limited service man, but I've been working with you all seven years of this trip, and I think I can trust you. I want you to know just how bad things are back there, so you won't be trying to send off any reports while I'm asleep."

He took two steps across the control compartment to the door of his cabin and thrust his fingers into the lock of a drawer that would respond to no pore-patterns but his own. "Read this," he said, and produced a sheet of yellow flimsy. Shannon took it:

321.59 GODDARDPORT SECRET OFCRS EYES ONLY FYI NCP OFCRS EYS ONLY. TO ALL CAPTAINS 4 & 2 MAN NEPTUNIUM SEARCH CREWS: DO NOT REPEAT DO NOT ADVISE ANY DISCOVERY BUT NEPTUNIUM RESOURCES INCOMPLETE TO SEND HEAVY FREIGHTERSSZ ONLY ENOUGH FUEL MAIN POWER SYSTEM THREE YEARS. BLAKE. SECRET 334.59

As Shannon frowned over the symbols, Belandis said: "Came in over the automatic while you were off watch. Now do you think there's anything to be cheerful about?"

SHANNON lifted an amazed face. "But it's inconceivable! Do you really mean to say that the whole earth has so little radioactive material left that it can't even send out one heavy freighter?"

"The whole earth, the Venusian colony, the moon station and the Martian mines put together," said Belandis, gloomily. "That's exactly right. And what's more, just as it says there, the main power stations are going to go out of business in three years. Figure that out."

"I am. Even if we do get the neptunium and get back, we'll barely make it. It's a little over three years back in a straight-line distance."

"That's right." Belandis nodded thoughtfully, then said, "And during the gap, part of the world will be without power of any kind. No factories. No lights. No radio. No connection with the Venus colony."

"That would be tough, all right. I don't know how I'm going to do without my diet of Venus colony babes when I get back. But seriously, Armand, I had no idea. This is a world emergency. Couldn't they set up reserve stations to operate the power system on—well, electricity, or chemical fuels, or something?" Shannon's brow was furrowed with concentration.

"You mean the way they did four or five centuries ago? I daresay some preparation has been made in that direction. It isn't going to do much good, though; the old methods of power generation are too inefficient to keep the main power system running. And you know damn well yourself that you can't make a chemical-fuel rocket with oomph enough to carry a crew even as far as the moon station and make a safe landing to say nothing of Mars or Venus. It's neptunium or nothing, and that means it's us or nobody."

"Maybe some of the other search teams—" ventured Shannon.

"They're all farther out than we are, except Yamaguchi, and he's on the way home. He's the reason why all this hasn't been made public, by the way. Remember what happened when it was announced he had a strike? The catch is the psycho-index. Can you imagine what will happen when four billion people find out they aren't going to have power for anything any more?"

"I guess I can," said Shannon soberly, and looked up at the visi-plate, where the image of 70 Ophiuchi, planet IV, swung above them, a cigar-brown ball. "I wonder what it's going to be like on that place."

"Atmosphere envelope, like Venus, all right," said Belandis. "I don't think we should let her have more than another fifteen minutes before beginning to check off. The impact might be serious with a cloud-belt of that density."

Beyond the growing disc of the planet cut the flaming ball of 70 Ophiuchi to a series of dazzling red coronal flashes. As the steady clicking of the Geiger-Rovere furnished the only noise in the control room, both men busied themselves with the controls of the jets, turning each on and off for a few minutes to check their speed and bring the spherical craft, so easy to handle in space, so clumsy in an atmosphere, into position behind the planet.

"No certainty of rotation," remarked Belandis, casually, and Shannon said, "There she comes! Let's hope its neptunium, not one of the high radioactives that would cook us, or one of the low ones that won't keep. Hey, look there!"

The ship was suddenly in a darkness of brown cloud, weirdly illuminated by the flame-streaks of the forward jets as they braked the craft in for a landing. But there was something decidedly strange in the behavior of those jets. As they slanted across the field shown on the visiplates, the brown cloud seemed to suck them in and absorb them a few inches beyond the jet orifices.

"What is it?" cried Shannon. "Not getting power!" answered Belandis, wrenching desperately at the controls, and in an instant they were through the cloudy blanket into a scene that made them both gasp. The whole sub-atmosphere of 70 Ophiuchi, planet IV, was filled with pinpoints of brilliance like a phosphorescent sea. Vivid rainbows of color jagged across a brilliant landscape, and through the sky floated a swarm of transparent angle-sided vessels, blobs of color flashing from their walls as they shot in all directions to avoid the streaking path of Search Vessel 472.

THE SHIP bounced and lurched like a racing car on a bad road. Shannon, half-thrown from his seat, grabbed at a hand rail. "The instruments!" cried Belandis. "Put her on manual; the automatic landing computers are being overloaded with conflicting data from all these lights and crystals."

Shannon hurled himself at the control for the braking jets. At that mo-

ment another heave of the wildly bucking car sent him sprawling to the floor, there was a violent crash, then another, and another, and the two members of the search team were on the floor of their control cabin in a mass of arms and legs, very completely out.

Shannon was the first to regain consciousness, feeling very much like the morning after a night in a Venusian gin-mill followed by a session with a gang of kleego-men. It was pitch-dark in the wrecked ship, and Belandis was lying half-way across him; with the help of his pocket torch he managed to get one of the emergency lights going and examined the captain. Belandis was breathing, but rather heavily and there was a thin trickle of blood from his nose. Shannon diagnosed concussion or a skull-fracture, but as there was nothing that could be done about either but keep the man quiet, he addressed himself to the problem of escaping.

It proved unexpectedly easy. The main control room door yielded at the first touch, and Shannon found himself looking out into a world whose unshielded brilliance made him blink. 472 lay at the foot of a long earth-slide leading down from the crest of the cliff whose contact had produced the wreck. Half a dozen jet-tubes poked forlornly from a mass of earth at the beginning of the downward journey; the whole slope was littered with torn plates and twisted girders, and only the powerful internal suspension of the control car had saved it.

Shannon shook his head and looked around. The whole surface of the valley where 472 lay was like a trough littered with thoroughly shattered panes of glass. From the middle of the mass rose a transparent pyramidal tower in the center of which lights flashed on and off with the intense brilliance of an arc-weld; and as the man from earth watched, one of the crystalline vessels landed a couple of hundred yards away, and three of the inhabitants of 70 Ophiuchi, planet 1V, came slithering out to greet him.

They were as grotesque as Martian lobsters, but as Shannon instantly recognized, not illogical in a world that seemed largely crystalline in structure. Nearly completely translucent, the bodies had different-hued internal parts that changed color as the creatures moved; the heads were tetrahexahedrons, like the shape of the ship they had come in; there didn't seem to be anything like arms.

As the three approached, Shannon held up one empty hand in the gesture of harmlessness and friendship practically universal among the worlds. The three stopped and something in the center of one of the hexagonal heads pulsed rhythmically, though without sound. Shannon reached into his pocket for a piece of paper and a pen and traced out the standard diagram of the Pythagorean theorem that the square of the hypotenuse equals the square of the two sides, which is always used in establishing communication with alien races. One of the Ophiuchians came closer, appeared to examine it, then produced more pulsations.

Clearly this was not going to get very far, and Belandis back in the control cabin was in need of help. Shannon started toward it, making a beckoning gesture; the three seemed to understand that readily enough, for they followed him, and when he indicated the injured captain, two of them bent over him, then turned toward each other and pulsed rapidly. One of them backed out the door and started toward their own ship at a rapid pace; the other two bent over Belandis again, and now Shannon saw they did have arms of a sort, three of them, with multiple joints, in which they easily cradled the injured man.

"Hey!" said Shannon. "That guy ought not to be moved."

DISREGARDING Shannon's frantic gestures, the Ophiuchians paid no

attention. He tried to grasp one of the arms, but the creature merely shook him off gently, though with surprising strength, and the pair took Belandis outside, where they laid him on the ground as gently as they had lifted him. The third one was back almost before they had done so, carrying what looked like a box in milky glass with studs at one side. This he placed over the captain's head, fiddled with the studs, and stood aside. Belandis sat up and put one hand to his head.

"Wow!" he said. "My head aches." He looked around. "Holy jumping catfish! What are these dinner-table ornaments?"

"It's the reception committee," said Shannon, "and I think they just saved your life. From all I can make out, you had a skull fracture and internal hemorrhage."

Belandis got slowly to his feet. "Then they're not only friendly, but have a great deal of knowledge," he said. "And that's a break. How did you tell them what was wrong?"

"I didn't. They don't seem to understand the theorem, either. They just figured things out for themselves."

"All right, I'll take over on that end." He glanced at the strewn wreckage of 472. "Not much there, but see if you can salvage enough to get a communications set going. If this looks good we'll want to get in a report."

As Shannon set to work, he saw Belandis produce pen and paper, while the three Ophiuchians resumed their rythmic pulsations. He grinned to himself.

There didn't seem to be any night on this place, or any variation in the continual brilliant radiance that seemed to flow from the underside of the cloud layer. Beams of color flowed through the air as Shannon toiled over the shattered set, and occasionally one of the tetrahexahedral vessels swung past or hovered just overhead, but nobody interrupted him until Belandis came over and sat down wearily on a pile of crystals that should have had sharp edges, but didn't.

"How are you coming, Tim?" he asked. His voice sounded weary.

"Fairly well. I've got enough to send and to receive on sound. But the video-range tubes are all gone, and I don't think the printing automatic can be made to work unless I can get tools that will handle some of this scrap. What luck did you have?"

"Damned little." Belandis emphasized the point by flinging one of the shards of crystal away from him. "They can't seem to understand the simplest drawings. I've drawn everything from star-maps to pictures of them and ourselves, but all they do is pass them around and stand there, blazing away with every color in the spectrum and I think some that aren't. There seemed to be gaps when they hit the red and violet."

"Maybe it's telepathic—or partly?" Shannon suggested.

"None of their ideas registered in my mind. The funny thing is, they seem perfectly friendly and anxious to be helpful. They took me over to their ship and showed me the whole thing, even let me handle the controls. It's got an atomic-powered engine of some kind, though it isn't a jet, and there doesn't seem to be an electrical system. I found a tube of water—damned if I know what they use it for—and they let me take it without a murmur. Help yourself to a drink if you want to."

"Didn't you make any progress at all?"

"If you could call it that. I gave up on pictures after a while, and tried sound—banging two of those pieces of crystal together. They got something out of it all right, because I noticed that every time I did that, one of them would imitate me, giving exactly the same number of bangs. But they must have thought it a pretty silly game; after a while they gently pushed me out the door and went away. Let's get some shuteye. I want to think."

THE only timepiece on 472 that was still in full running order was Shannon's watch, so the two members of the search team had slept nearly ten hours when they were roused by one of the Ophiuchians opening the door of the cabin and politely pulsating his colored light on their recumbent forms. As they started up, he touched Belandis on the arm and motioned through the doorway.

"Seems to want me," said the captain. "I suppose I'd better go and see whether I can't establish some kind of communication. Do you want to come along and have a try, too?"

"I don't think I'd be as much use as I would be right here trying to get another kind of communication." Shannon grinned. "The adjusting beam is busted, and I'll have to use a universal scanner, then narrow down, if I'm going to get in touch with earth at all. It will take hours if I'm lucky; if not, it may take weeks. Say, what in the world is that bird doing?"

From a case slung at his side, the Ophiuchian had placed on the ground before them a hexagonal-sided dish, nearly filled with a liquid which smoked slightly. Now he pointed at it, then at the earthmen, and pulsated brilliantly.

"Probably the local equivalent of a breakfast," said Belandis. "But I don't think I care for any. It smells like something that had died a long while ago and has just been dug up. Phew!"

"One of the mercaptans with a metallic admixture," said Shannon. "No, I certainly wouldn't, Armand. Look." He produced the pocket Geiger-Haenle that the chemical member of each search team carried and held it over the steaming bowl. It chattered madly. "Highly radio-active. What a race! He wants us to take it, though."

The Ophiuchian bent over the bowl and thrust the tip of one of his arms into it. They could see some of the liquid flow up the translucent member, and the level in the bowl sank slightly.

"Direct ingestion," remarked Shannon. "All the same, I don't think I'll try it. Suppose you buzz off with him, while I run a chemical test on this stuff and try to reach earth."

He lifted the bowl to carry it into the control car as Belandis took the creature's arm and led him away. It must have been seven or eight hours before he knocked at the door of the control car, which Shannon had closed in order to concentrate on his task.

"Here he is now," said Shannon. "Will you call Dr. Blake at once? It is very difficult to hold this beam with the automatic not working. Come here, Armand; use this mike. It's the only one in running order."

The radio growled and sputtered with static. "Hello, Belandis," said a voice with the fog-horn quality of extreme long-range communication. "This is Vitosky, Goddardport. Identification formula 29-5-Zed-3; you may speak freely. What luck on the search? Blake will be here in a moment."

Belandis glanced at Shannon. "Did you analyze?" he said in a low voice.

Shannon nodded. "Everything's all right. It's mainly a uranium 238 salt, but there is a strong admixture of neptunium. We've got it."

"Vitosky, the news is good," said Belandis. "The stuff is so plentiful they even use it for food here."

"Thank God," said the voice, the relief in it coming through the static. "Here's Dr. Blake now."

"Blake, head of research speaking," said the new voice crisply. "Identification formula 88-1-A-1. How are you, Belandis? We heard you had a little trouble."

"The ship is a wreck, sir. But I think everything's going to be all right. This place is simply lousy with neptunium and the natives are friendly."

There was a momentary silence. Then Blake's voice said; "Are you alone, Belandis?"

The captain glanced at Shannon and put a finger to his lips. "Yes, sir."

"Then listen carefully. There isn't

enough radioactive material left on earth to send even one ship out to pick you up without cutting off central power. Can you rebuild the ship?"

"No," said Belandis. "The machines they have here are totally unsuited to handling any type of metallic structure. They operate on crystal growth."

"That's very bad, Belandis."

"It may not be, sir. These Ophiuchians have ships of their own—tetrahexahedrons in shape. They let me handle one of them today. It's perfectly capable of space flight and very fast. I should estimate that I could reach earth in two years with one. But I'd have to come alone if I brought any appreciable cargo; they're quite small."

"That's the best news I've heard in years, Bel—" The voice suddenly cut off in a series of piercing static howls. Shannon flung himself on the knobs and twisted feverishly, then relaxed.

"Show's over for today, Armand," he said. "You won't get any more communication with Blake till the revolution of this planet carries us around to where my beam will bear on earth again. I had them hook in the relay stations back home so it won't matter what happens at that end."

"How long will it be?" asked Belandis.

"Matter of fifteen hours, I would judge by the amount of time I was able to hold them. How did you make out?"

BELANDIS shook his head. "Not at all. Tim, this is the damndest place I ever saw in my life. Can you imagine a planet where almost everything is crystalline? This is it. There isn't any vegetable life that I could detect, and virtually everything, when it isn't transparent or translucent is some violent color—violet, indigo, blue, green, orange. I'm certain they've got at least two shades in the infra-red. That's the trouble about communicating with them, except by sign-language, which doesn't get you far. I'm sure they can't understand why we didn't eat their gruel this morning."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, all the systems we have of communicating are based either on sound or on the monochromatic abstract lines that we use as letters. But these Ophiuchians have no alphabet, no printed matter, and no understanding of the principle of abstract line. The only thing that means anything to them is color. They use it for all their communication."

"I see." Shannon ran his tongue around his lips. "But what about sound?"

"They only apprehend it as number. I did manage to indicate that my number is four, and one of these Ophiuchians has tagged himself as five, but it's going to take a hell of a long time to build up on that basis—matter of years, I'd say. You might work on it while I'm gone."

"While you're *gone?*"

"Yes. Get it through your thick Irish head, Tim, that this is an emergency. You heard what Blake said. Just as soon as I can possibly do it, I'm going to get them to load up one of those vessels with as much of that radio-active soup as they'll give me and take off. Sorry to leave you, Tim, but I'll be back for you in the most palatial passenger cruiser the world owns. One load of that stuff will give us power to burn."

It was that last remark that Shannon remembered with particular bitterness some thirty-two hours later. Not long before he had seen Belandis step into one of the tetrahexahedral vessels and soar toward the perpetual cloud blanket of the brilliant planet, and he was listening to the words of Dr. Ramon Blake, scientific head of the whole earth and its system:

" . . . thought it advisable to place the whole story on video in view of the rumors that began to spread. You will accordingly find yourself famous . . ." when the door opened suddenly on an Ophiuchian who tapped five times on

the wall and pulsated rapidly.

" . . . and it is my pleasure to confer . . . " the radio squawked as Shannon gazed beyond Belandis' friend toward two others who came clashing and slithering across the ground-crystals, carrying the captain with them.

" . . . appreciation of the entire . . . " said the radio. "Armand!" cried Shannon, as the Ophiuchians deposited Belandis at the door and he heaved himself gropingly inside. "Just a minute, Dr. Blake. I'm afraid something has gone wrong. Here's Captain Belandis."

"Are you in communication?" asked the captain. "Give me the mike. Hello, Dr. Blake. This is Belandis. Something has gone wrong. As soon as I got past the atmosphere of this planet, the unshielded rays of its sun struck me with full force, and there was no protection in that transparent vessel against either the direct light or the reflections from the hundreds of crystalline prisms within. Sir, men of our type can never use these Ophiuchian craft in space, and—I am blind."

THERE was a moment of silence, punctuated by the buzz of static. Then Blake's voice said; "Shannon is not affected, is he?"

"No."

"Then tell him that it is absolutely essential for him to achieve communication with the Ophiuchians and persuade some of them to come to earth in their own vessels."

Shannon took the mike. "This is Shannon, sir. I'm afraid it's impossible."

"Nonsense," said Blake, hardly. "This is an order. You were chosen for the service because the psych tests showed you to be resourceful and hardy."

"But they only communicate by color."

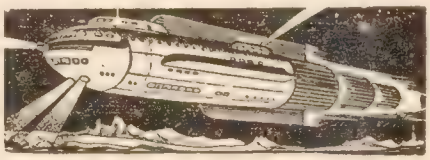
"I realize that the difficulties are immense, but the entire resources of the world are behind you. You have only to record some of these color sequences and repeat them to us, and I will direct all the semanticists and philologists on earth to work on it. It won't be half as difficult as hieroglyphic or Hittite or the language of the Martian ruins, and those were solved easily."

"But, sir, you don't understand. I'm a limited service man."

"What's that got to do with it? We'll promote you."

Shannon looked through the door of the control car, out across the blazing fields, which, Belandis said, were a riot of color.

"Sir," he said, "the reason I was placed on limited service is because I am totally color-blind."



AMONG NEXT ISSUE'S HEADLINERS

MOMENT WITHOUT FEAR

A Powerful Novelet by JOEL TOWNSLEY ROGERS

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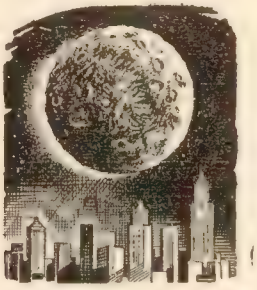
PLUMBER'S FRIEND

A Novelet of a Galactic Trouble Shooter by GEORGE O. SMITH

OUR INHABITED UNIVERSE



Part V—The Rings of Sol

By JAMES BLISH

AT THE American Museum of Natural History in New York City there is a model which must have given many a visitor to the museum a bad case of creeps. It is a model of the city, as it looks from an airplane coming in toward La Guardia Airport at an altitude of about 4,000 feet. And hanging over the center of Manhattan, almost resting on Times Square, is a smooth ball of rock which looks to be almost a mile in diameter.

The model is intended only to give visitors a good visualization of the size of the minor planet (or "asteroid," a misnomer but now official) named Hermes; but it succeeds also in suggesting an incipient disaster of unprecedented magnitude. If the visitor happens to know that in 1937 Hermes came within 485,000 miles of the Earth—and that at one point in its orbit it may likely come even closer, inside the orbit of our own moon—the model becomes even more vividly suggestive. And if, to top it all off, the visitor has seen Chesley Bonestell's painting of what New York might look like *after* an object only a fourth the size of Hermes had hit it—a painting which happens to picture the city from about the same height and visual angle as the model—the impulse to get out of the museum fast and head inland is almost overpowering.

Actually, of course, the chance that our Earth might suffer a collision with Hermes or any other asteroid is vanishingly small.

And with the thought of such unlikely calamity aside, the asteroids in general take on a different and much more interesting appearance.

Ringside Seat

Suppose we "stand" out in empty space, at a position about one light-year above the north pole of the sun. From here, the orbits of all the planets are laid out below us in a flat plane, like imaginary circles (or, for the purist, ellipses) on a platter. Seen from this point of view, the asteroids lie in a broad ring around the sun, between the orbits of Jupiter and Mars.

The resemblance of this ring-system

Rivers of Cosmic Junk Surround the Bringer of Light!

to the rings of Saturn is startling in some respects. Like Saturn's rings, the rings of Sol consist of rivers of cosmic junk: more than 1500 known bits of flotsam, plus a probable 28,000 others of much smaller size. The known planetoids range from mountain-sized lumps no bigger than Hermes to large "islands" in space almost 500 miles through. (None of the particles making up Saturn's rings is any bigger than an ordinary pebble, of course.)

And, like Saturn's rings, the rings of Sol show marked divisions, known in both cases as Kirkwood's Gaps, caused by gravitational disturbance from larger planets nearby. The gaps in the rings of Saturn are created by Saturn's three inner moons, Mimas, Enceladus and Tethys; Jupiter causes most of the gaps in the asteroid belt, but there is also a faint division attributable to Mars.

In the asteroid belt, however, things get done on a bigger scale, as befits the rings of a star. The belt starts much farther out from the sun, in comparison with Sol's diameter, than do Saturn's rings in comparison with that planet's diameter; and the belt is far broader on the same comparison scale than are Saturn's rings. A simple table shows quickly the enormous discrepancies between the two systems (the figures represent miles):

	Saturn's Rings	*Asteroid Belt*
Diameter of Primary	75,000	864,400
Inside Radius	82,000	175,642,000
Width	83,000	223,207,000

Reduced to proportions, these figures become even more startling. The rings of Saturn begin at a distance less than 1/11th the diameter of Saturn above the visible surface of the planet; and they are about 1.12 times as wide as Saturn itself. The radius of the innermost asteroid orbit, on the other hand, is more than 204 times as great as the diameter of the sun, and the belt is more than 258 times as wide as its primary!

Left-overs of Creation

These proportions would seem to indicate that the rings of Sol are not, after all, basically like the rings of Saturn. This suspicion deepens when we note that there is at least one other sun (RW Tauri) which is ringed, and that this ring is made of incandescent gases, not solid particles. Here the resemblance to Saturn completely evaporates, leaving us with the more likely notion that the sun's rings are simply a late stage of such a gas-ring as RW Tauri's.

The best theories we have developed at present, the Weisaecker Scholium and the Hoyle cosmology, tend to confirm this suspicion. Saturn's rings probably were formed by the breakup of a Saturnian satellite; we'll duscuss how that happened later on. At one time it was thought that the asteroids belt was formed by a similar process, but later it turned out that the theoretical objections to this idea were numerous and knotty. For one thing, if all the asteroids were lumped together into one body, the resultant planet would have a mass equalling, at most, only 1/500th that of the Earth's—a body a mite more massive than Mercury, perhaps, but hardly big enough to get into gravitational difficulties with the sun.

Furthermore, if we adopt the "exploded planet" theory, we are forced to account for the five major families into which the asteroids fall, and at present it looks like we'll need five separate explosions to do it—just five times as hard to account for as one explosion. It is easier at the present time to consider the asteroids as left-overs of creation—fragments that failed to be included in one of the major planets when the solar system was formed.

Nevertheless, these fragments remain interesting to astronomers because of the hundreds of theoretical problems, such as those we've just mentioned, that they continue to pose; and to the layman because they are, in a real sense, a closed universe of independent planets, each

one unique and special.

Anyone investigating the asteroids for the first time finds odd and intriguing situations coming at him faster than he can take them in. There is Eros, a flat granite brick, five miles square on end and fifteen miles long, tumbling end over end through space; there is Anteros, which was given its popular name (not at all official) by the editor of a science-fiction magazine; Ceres, 480 miles in diameter, big enough to be a major moon of any of the planets (and enormously bigger than either of the moons of Mars); Hidalgo, which is at one end of its orbit, only twice as far away from the sun as the Earth, and is ten times as far away at the other end; the Trojan asteroids, which aren't in the belt at all but are grouped neatly in the orbit of Jupiter, trailing the giant planet by 60°; Ganymede, a 20-mile chunk which bears the same name as that of the most massive satellite of the entire solar system; Adonis, which comes close to the orbit of Mercury at perihelion; and Vesta, which has such a low apparent density and such a high light-reflecting power that it may be made entirely of ice. . .

The Primeval Planet

Naturally, such a large and various gathering of little planets has attracted the imaginations of science-fiction writers, who have proposed everything from mining the planetoids to putting them "back together," like a gigantic jig-saw puzzle. Back in the 1930's it was customary to refer to the larger asteroids as habitable—indeed, they were often described as jungle worlds. Actually there isn't a trace of evidence to suggest that any form of life whatsoever could exist on any asteroid now (except, perhaps, for a few bacteria in the inactive or spore state.) Probably no modern science-fiction writer would even think of penning such a sentence as this one, from a major story published in 1931:

"Pallas swung around in their field of vision, and there was a fleeting glimpse of sun-lit spires of mountains, shadowed valleys, and mysterious crevasses from which clouds of steam and yellow vapor curled."

Even in those days it was known that Pallas was only 304 miles in diameter—the story even says so a page earlier—so that the chances for its having mountains large enough to notice, an atmosphere, enough water vapor to make steam, or enough vulcanism to make fumaroles are precisely nil. Furthermore, just how noticeably "sun-lit" a spire could be at a distance from the sun of 257,618,000 miles remains dubious.

If we are to think about life in connection with the asteroids, we must go back to the old (and still favored here and there) concept of the single planet which exploded. Following the lead of Ross Rocklynne, who sent an expedition to the asteroids for that purpose in TIME WANTS A SKELETON, let's re-assemble that primeval planet—always bearing in mind the chance that it may never have existed—and see what it might have been like.

We'll put its distance from the sun at 2.8 times the distance of the Earth, which is where it "ought" to be according to the Bode-Titius rule. We'll assign it a maximum possible mass of .05; (the total mass of the asteroids has been put as low as .006 by Alter and Cleminshaw, but the four largest alone should add up to more than that.) If we then assign our synthetic planet the same density as its nearest terrestial-type of neighbor—Mars (4.0)—we will emerge with a sphere 3,000 miles in diameter; a sphere displaying almost exactly the mass, and density characteristics of the planet Mercury!* (And needless to say, a good deal bigger than our moon.)

Atmosphere and Life

At 2.8 astronomical units from the

*A good many considerations enter into the choice of the figure for density which would require more discussion than we have space for here. In order to play safe, I've put it at 0.2 on what is probably the conservative side; if this correction should prove unnecessary, our synthetic planet's diameter would expand at about 3500 miles, or only slightly smaller than Pluto.

sun, the asteroid-planet would be cold. Even under a heat-conserving atmosphere the temperature would rarely rise above 10° F. on the "hottest" day of summer; the average normal temperature would be around -55° F, while the low point (midnight in winter) would fall around -110°. This low point is too ferociously cold to permit the survival of any creature of known metabolism which is not safely sealed in a comparatively warm burrow long before the low point is reached. However, the low temperature-average has an even more interesting consequence: it means that if our synthetic planet had an atmosphere, it would have been able to hold it.

Probably the planet would have had an atmosphere. Almost all the bodies in the solar system capable of holding an atmosphere have one, including Jupiter's satellite Ganymede and Saturn's satellite Titan, both of which are about of a size with our asteroid-planet. In addition to this observational evidence, our present theories of the formation of the solar system strongly favor the chance that a planet forming between Mars and Jupiter would pick up an atmosphere.

Which raises the question: what kind of an atmosphere?

A thin one, since the planet would have been small; but perhaps no thinner than that of Mars, which has successfully nurtured so much life that we can see it growing from Earth. Since there is at least one asteroid, and that a major one, which seems to be made of ice, the atmosphere would have contained some water vapor. Very possibly it might also have contained ammonia, methane, or even cyanogen, poisonous gases all; whether or not it would have contained free oxygen is more difficult to guess; here we can say only that we can't be sure enough of our speculations to risk writing them down.

Traces of Life

If there ever *was* a single planet in the area where the asteroids are now, however—and the question has by no means been settled—it might have harbored some form of life; probably something simple, tough, and fantastically cold-resistant. Nor are we barred from any practical answer to the problem, for if there ever was an "Asteroidium" which carried life, that life will have left traces in the exploded rocks, traces which are still waiting for us, traces which the first explorers of the asteroids will find.

Science-fiction writers have often pictured spacemen mining the asteroids for mineral riches. It may well be, however, that the first explorers of the minor planets will be looking for something far more interesting:

Fossils.

Look forward to our next issue, a veritable "Who's Who" of science fiction—featuring outstanding new stories by Fletcher Pratt, George O. Smith, Joel Townsley Rogers, Anthony Boucher, Murray Leinster, Fritz Leiber, William Temple, Harry Neal and others!

by
Frank Belknap Long

And Someday to MARS

He was the first man on Mars, and the last to find happiness

YOUNG JIM stood on the high bleached hill, staring down at the Martian village. It had stopped raining, and there was a smell of burning autumn leaves in the air. Not the raked-over autumn leaves of Earth, brown and crisp and sere, but the blue lichenous leaves of Mars, many-petaled, poppy fragrant.

Young Jim straightened his shoulders and went striding down into the village he'd helped to build.

He sang a song as he went, a trivial little song he'd picked up at his mother's knee long ago on Earth.

Someday to Mars
We'll all be going
It will be like stepping

From neighbor's house to neighbor's house.

It hadn't been quite that easy, but the villages were growing fast now, and the rocket ships were coming in three, four times a month.

It was good to be one of the younger settlers, to look forward rather than back, to swing along at a merry pace under the bright Martian sky.

The town started quite far out in the desert. It was just a little sleepy town at first, with a house here, a house there, separated by a road that wasn't even paved. But it got larger and more bustling with every step he took.

The Harveys didn't live very close to the bustling part. They had a fine large house right on the outskirts, where the road was paved, but not really fit to travel on.

The Harvey children were playing in the back yard. Susan was baking mud pies and Bobby was impaled on the horns of a dilemma. He was trying to hold open the cellar door with his shoulder while he reached down inside for a basket of ripe tomatoes.

His mother was standing on the lawn scolding him. Bobby was actually trying to hold the door open and lift out the basket at one and the same time. It was a feat for a young Samson and Bobby wasn't quite that.

"Wait a minute, Bobby!" Jim shouted from the roadway. "I'll give you a hand!"

"Gee, thanks, Mr. Jim!" Bobby said, trying to squirm about and get a good look at one of the tallest men on Mars. Susan turned too, wondering how a man could be so strong.

Bobby missed his footing. His shoulder slipped, and the cellar door closed with a crash.

"Oh, be careful!" Mrs. Harvey cried, ten seconds too late.

Bobby was now impaled between the cellar door and a mash of spilled tomatoes.

"You were brought up on Mars, son," Jim said. "You ought to be accustomed to the light gravity by now."

Chuckling, he bent and raised the cellar door.

"Never try to do two things at once, son," he advised. "Otherwise you kind of miscalculate your strength. Either your arm overshoots the mark, or your knee flies up and hits your funnybone—a real hard smack!"

Bobby scrambled to his feet.

Susan stared at her brother, her eyes glinting. "Fud, fud, Bobby's all blood!" she improvised.

"Go wash your face, Bobby!" Mrs. Harvey said.

She gripped her son by the shoulder, turned him about and started him toward the house.

"Jim Westrum!" she said, over her shoulder. "Where have you been keeping yourself? What a way to treat old friends!"

"Hello, Mrs. Harvey!"

"Jim, you go straight inside and sit yourself down."

"Well, I could do with a cup of coffee, Lucy," Jim said. "One of your fine waffles, too, if it won't be putting you to too much bother."

A girl came into the yard. She was the kind of girl men dream about on Earth, and sometimes find on Mars. Not often, though. She had red-gold hair, which fell to her shoulders, and her eyes were the color of the Martian skies. Shifting, changing, shot through with flame tints.

She laughed and put a slender arm around Jim. She kissed him on the cheek.

"Handsomest man on Mars," she said. "Mmmm."

"You spoil me, Miss Harvey," Jim said.

"Miss Harvey! Did you hear that, Mom? We're practically strangers to the men!"

"Doesn't seem quite right to call you 'Ellen,' " Jim said. "You're so terribly pretty. Kathy might not like it."

"Kathy again!" Mrs. Harvey said. "Come on into the kitchen Jim. We can talk better over some coffee."

THEY went into the house. The children ran upstairs, Ellen descended into the cool room for some preserves and Jim and Mrs. Harvey made their way to the kitchen.

Jim seated himself in a chair by the window and crossed his long legs. He fumbled in his pocket for a pipe.

"Ellen will make some man a fine wife," Lucy Harvey said.

"One of these days you'll be marrying again yourself, Lucy," Jim said. "You're a mighty handsome woman. If I was free to pick and choose—"

"If I was twenty years younger I might take that for a hint, Jim," she said.

"There isn't a woman on Mars I'd rather marry if I wasn't already spoken for," Jim said.

"Spoken for! Land sakes, Jim—"

"Sure it has a funny sound," Jim said. "A man saying that. But that's how it was between Kathy and me, right from the start."

Jim nodded, his face lighting up.

"You see, when I was a kid and Kathy was no older, about seventeen, we were lying in a wheat field staring up at the sky. Kathy and me alone on Earth, everything else shut out.

"Alone with goldenrod in country lanes and the melting snows of April and rusty blackbirds on the wing. Only it wasn't April. It was October, and the woods were russet gold and, looking up the hillside, we could see pumpkins.

"But mostly we kept our eyes on the sky, on the rockets that would someday be blazing a path to the stars. And Kathy turned to me and said: 'Are you spoken for, Jim?'

"It was a funny thing for her to say, and I don't know what put it into her head. But I smiled and said: 'No, Kathy.' I didn't call her 'darling' or anything like that. I was too young to know how to be tender.

"I just said, no, I wasn't spoken for.

" 'Then I'm speaking for you right now, Jim,' she said.

" 'And I'm speaking for you, Kathy,' I said, meaning every word.

" 'Forever and ever, Jim?'

" 'For as long as we both shall live.' "

Jim lit his pipe and tilted his chair back against the windowsill.

"Kathy's coming on the next rocket!" he said.

There was a clatter by the stove. Lucy dropped her waffle iron, picked it up, and wiped her steaming face with her sleeve.

"I—I'm glad for you, Jim!"

"Lucy, now I can talk about it. I can tell you just how lonely I've been. Watching the rockets come in, envying all the men with wives. I had to keep telling myself that a man of twenty-eight could afford to wait awhile."

Jim laughed. "But I got to envying even the very young lads who could go roaming in the moonlight and kiss their girls and walk a ways and kiss them again."

"I'm really glad, Jim."

There was a clatter on the stairs. The children came into the kitchen, Bobby first. His face was flushed with excitement.

"The rocket's ahead of time!" he said. "The welcome flag just went up at the skyport. They're sending up flares too."

"You can see it from the roof!" Susan exclaimed.

Jim leaped to his feet. "That doesn't give me much time, Lucy."

"Do you know somebody on the rocket, Mr. Jim?" Susan asked.

"Just the girl he's going to marry," Lucy said. "If you hurry you can make it, Jim. You can be the first to welcome her."

"You're swell, Lucy." Jim said.

He kissed her and crossed the kitchen in three long strides. He was out the door before the children could ply him with questions.

He walked straight through the town he'd helped to build, his shoulders held straight, his eyes on the flares ahead. The flares were red, orange, blue, green, yellow. They cascaded down the sky, they burst in dazzling star formations.

The air trembled to the boom of the flares.

And out of each house he passed came a relative or friend or well-wisher of the new Martian colonists. Dogs barked and children raced to join their parents.

A procession formed and moved forward with Jim. It was a ragged procession with many stragglers, even though the ranks kept filling with new arrivals.

JIM walked so fast he outdistanced his neighbors and for a block or two he was quite alone, and for a block or two he was walking with ghosts and memories.

The houses no longer seemed quite real. He was walking through a cornfield on Earth, and he was walking with his head in the clouds.

Mars with its neat houses, wired for every comfort, seemed remote, unreal. The houses he'd known as a kid were huge and rambling, with attic rooms filled with musty cobwebs, and you could look out the windows at boughs swaying in the moonlight and imagine yourself in a haunted forest, imagine yourself buried alive in some vast and shadowy tomb.

He shook the illusion off. Mars was bright and new, a world of drenching sunlight, and igneous rocks so dazzling you had to shield your eyes when you were out in the desert on a clear day.

Jim knew every man and woman in town. Sometimes it took a week or two to get acquainted with a new colonist, but Jim was a neighborly person with a great deal of perseverance.

Now his neighbors kept catching up with him, and striding along at his side.

"Rocket's a day early, Jim! I told the missus—"

"Wait a minute, Magruder. I've got first call on him. He promised me some advice yesterday—then just walked off and forgot about it."

"You don't do that often, Jim! Got something on your mind?"

"Somebody you know on the rocket, Jim?"

"Jim, do you mind if I phone you tonight? I'd like to get your opinion on that new linoleum I told you about. Tom says it won't stay flat, no matter how hard you press it down."

"Mr. Jim, fix my top!"

"First one gets to the skyport gets an agate! You be the judge, Mr. Jim!"

It was easy to fix a doll or a child's top. Harder to fix what needed mending inside of a man. No child should be allowed to grow up thinking everything could be fixed, Jim told himself. They should be taught instead that even mended things came apart right when you needed them most.

On the other side of the town the houses thinned again. But the road remained paved, for the skyport was close to the town and the town had to stay dressed up in proximity to so much splendor.

Jim could see the rocket now. Everyone could see it, and a great shout went up.

The rocket was descending through the sky like a silver minnow swimming in a lake of fire. It grew larger, became a flashing silver trout. In almost no time at all it was a sporting porpoise, a hundred-foot whale breathing fire through its nostril slits.

Jim watched the flames dwindle, the great column of dust shoot up.

He moved forward like a man in a dream, tossing about on a bed of air as wide as the gulfs between the stars.

In the skyport winds played idly over fluttering flags, raised little clouds of cinder dust.

She was the last to emerge. She stood on a high silvery platform just under the mooring cables, the great rocket towering above her. The hot Martian sun was blazing down and filling the air with a brightness which hovered like a sheet of flame between the crowds and the rocket. But her beauty was like the night, like the eyes which Nature dusts on the wings of night-flying moths, all velvet and dusky gold.

Jim climbed the ladder and walked

straight toward her, his lips feverish with the words he must say.

She hadn't changed. That was the really incredible thing. She was still wearing the small tilted hat she'd worn the last time he'd seen her. He wondered if her hair would be bound in the same simple way with a bright golden band.

He'd have to remove her hat to find out. He pictured himself smiling and gently whisking the hat from her head, seeing the dark splendor of her hair come into view, ruffling her hair with his big, clumsy fingers.

"Oh, darling, please! Everybody's looking at us!"

He could almost hear the whispered words, like honey dripping with exploring gentleness into the secret recesses of his mind.

He could hardly believe that she was not already talking to him and laughing, that they were not even now descending the ladder arm in arm, as joyous as two eager young lovers climbing down from a haystack beneath a red harvest moon.

She was still thirty feet away, and just turning. Would she recognize him instantly or would joy and tenderness creep slowly into her eyes? The thought that he might seem like a stranger to her, if only for an instant, gave him a feeling of weakness about the knees.

She had turned now and was staring straight at him. Her lips were slightly parted, and her lashes seemed to be sprinkled with star dust.

Inside Jim a floodgate of emotion broke, and the words he must say came in a shout.

"Kathy! Kathy! I've waited so long!"

THE GIRL on the platform did not move at all. Surprise came into her eyes, and an almost instant warmth and friendliness. But it was not the warmth of recognition, and when Jim put out a hand to touch her she took a full step backward.

"I'm afraid—you've mistaken me for someone else," she said.

Jif's heart ceased to beat. His eagerness had been all emotion, but now his mind took charge. A dryness, a crackling horror of thought made him look unflinchingly into her eyes.

"You—you don't know me?"

The girl shook her head. "I'm sorry," she said, with good-humored gentleness. "My name's Barbara—"

Jim turned slowly, a sob strangling in his throat. He moved to the edge of the platform, and gripped the waist-high upper rungs of the ladder, as if steadying himself against an almost unbearable shock.

His temples throbbed with the dull ache of a mental anguish he had known before, and had hoped never to know again. He seemed to age as he stood there facing the rocket, to grow too weary to descend. He brought up one hand and ran it over his brow. Then slowly he started downward, his shoulders stark against the skyport glow.

Someone touched the girl on the arm and said: "Sorry if he startled you, Miss. In a way he's the sanest man on Mars. But once in a while he forgets. His mind slips a notch, like a metal bearing that's been triggered too fine."

"But who is he?"

"Who? That is Jim Westrum—the first earthman on Mars."

The skyport official was a young man with clear blue eyes that tightened a little when the girl looked at him in puzzled wonder.

"But why did he call me Kathy?" she asked.

"Why? The loneliness, most likely, the long, empty years. Fifty years ago he came to Mars. In the rocket that couldn't be built and yet was built. The rocket no one really believed in.

"It was the first great, tremendous space flight, but no one on Earth, least of all the astronomers, could know whether he ever reached Mars. And when you don't know, when you can't be sure, you cease to care. Interest dies."

"But that flight fired the imagination of all men!" the girl exclaimed, in vehement protest. "I remember my grand-

father saying—"

"For a few short months it did. But at that time rocket flight, even to just beyond Earth's atmosphere, was still in an experimental stage. Interplanetary travel as we know it was still in the blueprint stage.

"We had a great deal of inertia to overcome, human indifference, human refusal to put first things first. And we had another war to win. It took forty years."

"You mean—"

The official nodded. "For forty years he was alone on Mars. Alone in the desert waste, with only a few ordinary mechanical devices from the rocket to help him with problems of food and shelter and make it a little easier for him to stay alive. Alone with the hot days and cold nights, the blinding sand storms, and the pelting snow and sleet."

The girl seemed hardly to be listening. She was staring at the outlines of misty hills, rising into the bright sky. Her eyes sought out the town and stared beyond it, as though measuring the breadth, and height and depth of one man's influence under the sun.

"He's not forgotten on Earth now," she said.

The official nodded. "He's in the history books, if that means anything. In the popular mind he's very much Mr. Big. But here he's just a good neighbor and friend."

He smiled. "Ten years ago he was here, hale and hearty, to welcome the first settlers. He was seventy then and he's crowding eighty now. I like to think he'll be here when the towns are cities, and Mars is a stepping stone to the stars."

"He will be," the girl said.

"He ought to be. He's still sound of body and mind. If his mind slips a notch now and then, that's to be expected in a man his age who has lived a dozen lives to the full."

"His neighbors and friends—do they understand?"

The official nodded. "Completely. They fall in with his mood, even the children, but not in a patronizing way. If you think Jim Westrum isn't a great man to his neighbors—"

"I don't think that. Tell me, does he happen to mistake some strange young girl for his Kathy every time a rocket arrives?"

"No—that only occurs once or twice a year."

"I see."

When the official left the girl stood with her lips slightly parted and her eyes shining as if some great wonder had come upon her thoughts with hoofbeats of flame.

A FAMILY resemblance could be a startling thing. She remembered a faded photograph in an album thick with dust. A contact lens had brought a contrast of light and shade, an illusion of serious maturity to the features of a girl still in her teens. There was a tennis court and a resort hotel in the background, and if she had been born three generations earlier that girl might have been herself.

A small painting she'd treasured as a child showed an even more striking resemblance, for Aunt Catherine had been convinced for a long time that Jim Westrum would return, and a patient defiance looked out of her eyes, the conviction that nothing could ever be truly lost in space and time.

"Great Aunt Catherine!" the girl on the platform said aloud. "You don't rest under the willows at all. I bet you're walking at this moment at his side, even if he doesn't see you.

"He needs you as a thirsty harvest needs rain, and that means more than just being remembered. You couldn't be loved like that, and stay under a white stone marker in a fenced-in New England spring. The hushed small woodlands wouldn't be great enough to hold you!

"Aunt Catherine, if you've lagged behind, if he's a few steps ahead of you,

go join him. Don't stay here to stare at me. Hurry, Aunt Catherine!"

On the white road leading back into town Jim Westrum strode with his shoulders squared, feeling again the slim hand in his that had never really been withdrawn, hearing the sweet clear voice and feeling against his cheek the blowing hair fragrant with meadow mist.

"Jim! Jim, darling! I'm speaking for you right now!"

The town he'd helped build an arabesque of beauty was beckoning him homeward, and the sky at his back was a cauldron now, glowing with crystal fires. Two visions blurred his sight. Through the Martian brilliance and splendor he saw again the russet October hills, the rambling, musty houses, the beautiful disordered landscape of so long ago. The slim girl at his side was so much a part of that landscape—wild, young, free, restless in the lovely, simple land.

She would listen, her eyes full of wonder, to his dreams of rockets and other planets, but the lights in her eyes would dim when he spoke of the gaps in time and space that must lie between them until she too, could share his new land.

"Jim, no matter how long it takes, no matter what happens, we'll always be together," she smiled up at him. "I'll be at your side."

Walking toward his city, he heard the words so clearly and quickened his step.

Jim Westrum, the first man on Mars.

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The REGAL

Sequel to THE MERAKIAN MIRACLE

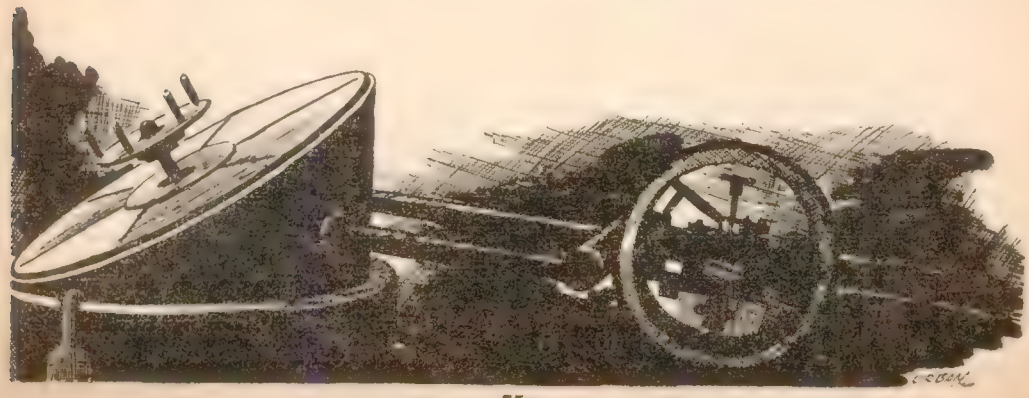
RIGELIAN

I

ALTHOUGH it was lunch time, the Cosmic Roof of the Mercurian-Astoria Hotel in Nyork belied the clock. Lights were dimmed to a romantic glow. The ceiling was a three-dimensional panorama of the stellar system. In the background, a Venusian stringed orchestra provided muted love music. Seated at a corner table, Manning Draco managed the difficult feat of eating Vegan pastry while reciting Martian poetry and gazing passionately at Lhana Xano.

It was now four months since Lhana Xano had gone to work as the receptionist at the Greater Solarian Insurance Company, Monopolated, and a steady campaign on the part of Manning Draco had finally produced a luncheon date. He made the proper dramatic pause be-

Manning Draco had to outsmart his rival but his rival outranked him, being king for a week—and Manning could have crowned him!



fore the last line of the poem, taking advantage of it to finish off the last of the pastry, then ended with lyrical passion. He leaned back in his chair and gazed at his companion.

There was no doubt that Lhana Xano was a Martian beauty. Her head fur, glistening like burnished copper, was arranged in the latest Terran style. The soft lights of the Cosmic room did wonders with her copper skin and slant eyes. She wore a green dress, caught up over one shoulder and tight-fitting, which revealed her voluptuous humanoid figure.

"You did that well," she said as he finished the poem. "I didn't know that you were so familiar with the Martian classics." A slight lisp was her only trace of Martian accent.

"There's so much you don't know about me," Manning said lightly. "You realy owe it to yourself to learn *all*. I don't spend all of my time, you know, being chief investigator for Greater Solarian. For example, I have a very fine collection of Martian *Tsigra* art—from the *Zylka* Period—in my apartment. If you'd care to see it—" He broke off as Lhana burst into laughter.

"What's so funny?" he demanded.

Lhana stifled her laughter, but there was still a glint of amusement in her three eyes.

"Since I've been working for Greater Solarian," she said, "I've been going to night school and studying Terran history."

"I don't see anything about that to make you laugh when I start talking about Martian art."

"You wouldn't," she said. "I've been studying the social history of Terra and I was thinking how funny it is that you Terrans have progressed so much in all the sciences without having improved the art of seduction."

"What do you mean?" Manning asked gruffly.

"Almost two thousand years ago, male Terrans were inviting girls up to their apartments to see their etchings. And here you are using the same technique. The only thing that's changed is that etchings have now become Martian *Tsigra* art."

MANNING DRACO grinned. He was not one to be long bothered by such counter attacks. "Well," he said, "from all I've been able to discover, we're also staggering along with only two sexes and nobody has complained yet. So we'll forget the *Tsigra* art. How about—"

This time he was interrupted by a waiter who appeared carrying a portable visiplate.

"Mr. Draco?" he asked.

"Yes," Manning said, scowling. "What is it?"

"A call for you, sir," the waiter said. He plugged the visiplate into the table socket and departed.

The angry face of J. Barnaby Cruikshank stared out from the visiplate screen. The eyes were fixed upon Manning Draco.

"Ha!" said J. Barnaby Cruikshank. It was rumored around the galaxy that the president of the Greater Solarian Insurance Company could pack more sheer malevolence into a simple "Ha!" than most people could get with the aid of two magnetiguns.

"Go away," Manning Draco said wearily. He had been too long exposed to J. Barnaby's anger to be impressed. "I'm busy and besides it's my lunch hour and you do not own me body, soul and lunch hour."

"Your lunch hour," J. Barnaby said bitingly, "was up fifteen minutes ago. It's bad enough that I have to put up with your making passes at every female in the office, but I will not tolerate your juvenile seductions being carried out on office time. If you're not back here within ten minutes, the name of Manning Draco will merely be an unfortunate blot on our otherwise perfect industrial relations record."

The screen faded as J. Barnaby broke contact.

"Now how did he know where to find me?" Manning mused. A sudden thought made him look at Lhana. She nodded brightly.

"I left word that we were lunching here," she said. "After all, I'm not as important a cog in the Greater Solarian scheme as you are and I could be fired for not being available."

"That's my complaint about you too," Manning said. "Between you and J. Barnaby, I might as well be a Plutonian metal termite*. My life is settling down to slavery and chastity."

As they got up from the table, Lhana put one hand on Manning's arm in a friendly gesture.

"Don't misunderstand, Manning," she said. "I'm really very fond of you. Even more, I appreciate the fact that there's more to you than the wolf you show. But let's leave it like that."

"For the nonce, only," Manning said lightly. Now that they were standing he had to look up at her for she towered a good seven inches over his six feet three. "But a Draco never gives up."

*The metal termite, a native of Pluto, is a blindless, underground insect, about ten feet long and weighing close to three thousand pounds, Earth scale. It is valuable to Federation industry because it devours ore and eliminates pure metal. As a source of cheap labor, its match has not been found in the galaxy.

The Cosmic Touch

REACTION to the MERAKIAN MIRACLE was so joyfully enthusiastic, that it is with untinged pride we give you this sequel. We suspect there isn't much that is safe from Mr. Crossen's scalpel. If you like a little gentle spoofing, a little stirring of the crust of musty gentility, you will enjoy the manner in which he goes to work on the Mrs. Grundies of the universe.

What makes it so delightful, as far as we are concerned, is the range of imagination displayed. Kidding humans is too easy for Crossen. He's got to jump a galaxy or two and kid creatures not yet invented.

The result is a kind of cosmic humor which is peculiarly and satisfyingly the kind of science fiction we always thought should be written. Read it and see!

—*The Editor*

"And an Xano never gives in," she said, laughing, as they left the restaurant.

Back at the office, Manning Draco stood in front of the private office of J. Barnaby Cruikshank until the scanner recognized him. As the door swung open, he stepped inside and faced the president of the company.

As the head of an insurance company that spanned two galaxies, and a man who was important in Federation politics, J. Barnaby Cruikshank was usually a model of sartorial elegance. But now his hair was badly mussed and his nonwrinkable coat was near to making liars of its manufacturers. From long experience, Manning Draco knew this indicated a crisis in the coffers of the Greater Solarian Insurance Company.

"Don't tell me," Manning said lightly, "I can guess. A planet full of our insured just killed themselves off and you want me to rush out and bring them back to life. Right?"

"*You* can afford to joke about it," J. Barnaby said in a pained voice. "*You* draw a nice salary in return for working about once a month. *You* can have a quiet, leisurely luncheon, keeping a valuable employee away from her work —while I sit here staving off disaster so that you may continue to draw that nice, fat salary—"

"Spare me your tears," Manning said with a grin. He draped himself over a chair. "I've seen your income tax returns . . . Now, what's the problem?"

"You know the planet Alphard VI?"

Manning Draco nodded. "The only habitable planet of ten in an orbit around Alphard. Rated as a Class C planet, despite a civilization which fulfills the requirements for Class B. Reclassification has been refused because the inhabitants are considered incurably eccentric. The Alphardians are considered non-humanoid, although there is now a suit in the Supreme Galactic Court contesting this ruling."

"Right," J. Barnaby Cruikshank said. "Alphard VI was admitted to the Fed-

eration ten years ago. We sold our first insurance policy to the Emperor that same week. We continued to sell a few policies there, but made very little headway until three years ago. Then, within the space of one year, we sold policies to almost three-fourths of the population."

"Dzanku and Warren?" Manning asked with a grin.

HERE J. Barnaby winced, his face taking on a persecuted expression. "Yes," he said. "Rigelian Dzanku Dzanku and Terran Sam Warren—the two best salesmen in the galaxy, as well as the crookedest, the dirtiest, double-crossing—"

"I gather that they did something which is going to cost you money?" Manning said.

"They're doing it now!" J. Barnaby struck the top of his desk with a clenched fist. "But this time we're going to throw them in jail!"

"We?" Manning asked gently.

"We," J. Barnaby declared, glaring at his chief investigator. "You'll get the goods on them and I'll see to it that the Federation judge gives them the limit."

"That's what I call a division of labor," Manning murmured. "Okay, what are they doing?"

"As you probably know," J. Barnaby said, "the Federation Charter permits us to establish a monopoly only when the government of a planet agrees to it. Although we have been the only insurance company operating on Alphard VI, the Emperor has always refused to grant us a monopoly. Now, a new insurance company has been established on Alphard VI."

"Dzanku and Warren?"

J. Barnaby nodded. "If it were legitimate competition, I wouldn't mind," he said piously. "Here, look at this." He tossed a large handbill to Manning.

It was printed in Alphardian and in English. Although he knew some Alphardian, Manning turned to the English version and read:

YOU CAN MAKE MONEY BY DYING

We are pleased to announce that the Galaxy Insurance and Benefit Association is now establishing its main offices on the glorious planet of Alphard VI and will issue special life insurance policies to all legal citizens of this planet at one-half the cost of any life insurance policy issued by any other company now operating in Galaxy I. In addition to this great saving, all of our policies carry an automatic double indemnity clause which becomes a part of the policy when a policy-holder has been insured by us for a period of fifty years or longer. Think of the fun you can have with the money saved from premiums—think of the joy which will come to your family when you drop dead!

But that is not all! In addition to this supercolossal offer, the Galactic Insurance and Benefit Association will give you a generous trade-in allowance on your old insurance policy if you are now insured by another company. All you have to do is bring in your present policy, sign it over to us, and receive a certificate entitling you to an extra one thousand credits of insurance with us. Be insured by the Galactic Insurance and Benefit Association and be the envy of your neighbors! If you carry one of our policies, you can't afford to live!

Dzanku Dzanku, Pres.
Sam Warren, Sec. & Treas.

Manning Draco tossed the leaflet back on the desk and grinned. "The Galaxy Insurance and Benefit Association," he said. "So far as Dzanku and Warren are concerned, there'll be more benefit than insurance in that association."

"Exactly," J. Barnaby said angrily. "It's easy to see what they're going to do. Not only will they sell a lot of policies which they never intend to honor, but did you catch that business about trading in old policies? They're going to get a lot of dumb natives to sign over policies they bought from us, then they'll arrange a convenient accident for the natives and collect from us. And this time we're going to stop them before they do their dirty work."

"How?" Manning asked innocently.

"That's your job—and you'll do it or else." Abruptly, J. Barnaby softened. "You can do it, Manning, my boy. There isn't a smarter operator in the galaxy than you. Aren't you the only person on Terra who has developed a secondary mind shield? Didn't you once get the best of Dzanku and Warren—even to

reading the mind of that slippery Rigelian, something that no one is supposed to be able to do. You won't fail me in the hour of my direst need."

"The visiscreen lost a great scenery chewer when you became a monopolist, J. Barnaby," Manning said. He grinned. "I don't know when I've seen you give a greater performance."

"I've already notified the field." J. Barnaby said gruffly. "Your ship will be ready when you get there."

"Okay. But just remember one thing, J. Barnaby—once I was lucky enough to pull a fast one on Dzanku. As a result, I was able to read his mind and that was what saved your neck on Merak II. But that was strictly a fluke. After this, Dzanku will be on his guard. My secondary mind shield keeps him from reading my mind, but I'll never be able to read his again either—and I'm not sure I'd want to even if I could."

"Okay," J. Barnaby said confidently, "so you'll find some other way of tying a rocket to his tail. I don't care what you have to do in order to get him—but get him."

"My master's voice," Manning murmured. "What if I have to break a few Federation laws to get him?"

"Then do it," J. Barnaby snapped. "But don't tell me anything about it," he added hastily. "The less I know about such things, the better."

"That's what I like about you—your high ethical standards," Manning said. He left quickly, but not before he saw the flush of anger spreading across J. Barnaby's face.

WHEN he reached the spaceport, Manning Draco's ship, the *Alpha Actuary*, was already on the launching level. He climbed in, fed the position of Alphard VI into the automatic pilot, and pressed the button which hooked the ship into magnetic power. The small ship raced up the launching rack and thrust itself skyward.

He was about an hour out from Terra when he decided to feed an encyclotape on Alphard VI through the audio-reader. He picked the tape from the library on the ship, but suddenly there was the shrill clangor of a bell. The automatic pilot threw the ship out of magnidrive so quickly that Manning almost fell to the floor. He left the tape there and hurried to the forward screen. The warning bell and the sudden braking meant that the ray-analyzers of the ship had spotted something ahead which was neither meteor nor another ship.

Manning leaned and glanced into the viewing screen. He rubbed his eyes and looked again. But he still saw the same thing despite the fact that his senses refused to accept it.

There, almost dead ahead of the ship, out in open space *stood* a figure. That is Manning thought in terms of its standing there although there was nothing but space to stand on. The body was pentahedral in shape, with a head in the form of an inverted pyramid. The legs were long and skinny and planted very firmly on nothing. The entire body was a very light purple in color and the only bit of clothing it wore was a rather silly looking green and white cap perched on the top of the head. As though to make the entire sight even less believable, one of the creature's two arms was lifted. The hand consisted of five fingers and two thumbs, with both thumbs hooked back past his shoulder in the signal which had meant a request for a ride for more than two thousand years.

"Great Fomalhaut!" Manning muttered to himself. "Now I've seen everything!" It was true that he had often picked up people thumbing rides on Terra, but this was the first time he had ever seen anyone thumbing a ride out in space.

He took over the ship from the automatic pilot and eased it up beside the figure. He thumbed the button that opened the outer door, waited what seemed a reasonable time, then closed it and watched the gauge which indicated air pressure in the air-lock. When

it equaled the interior of the ship, he thumbed open the inner door. Half expecting the whole thing to be an illusion, he watched in amazement as the purple figure strode through the door and bowed politely.

"Thank you, sir," the creature said in a rather stilted but precise English. "I was beginning to be afraid that there was little travel in this direction today."

Manning Draco took a deep breath and let it out carefully before answering. "Then you were really standing out there in space," he said accusingly.

"Of course," his visitor said.

II

AS THE FIRST impression eased, Manning noticed that there were two slanted eyes and a V-shaped mouth on the side of the head facing him. He saw no traces of what might pass for a nose or for ears.

"I thought," Manning said, "that I had seen about everything in the galaxy —but you're a new one on me. Where are you from?"

"Not from this galaxy which is perhaps why I seem strange to you," the visitor said. "I am Nar Oysnarn from the planet Kholem in the Coma-Virgo Galaxy. May I inquire if you are going in that direction?"

"I'm going to Alphard VI, in this galaxy."

"That will be a help," said Nar Oysnarn, nodding his triangular head. "You don't mind my riding with you?"

"I guess not," Manning muttered. He started the ship and turned it over to the automatic pilot, then turned back to the space-hiker. "It'll be worth it just to find out how you do it."

"Do what, sir?"

"Standing out there in space—where there's nothing to stand on—where there's nothing to breathe—and where I seriously doubt if that cap provides enough warmth."

"Oh, that," Nar Oysnarn said. "It's obvious you know nothing of my race. We are indifferent to oxygen, or the lack of it, and we are not sensitive to the pressure and temperature changes which seem to mean so much to everyone in this galaxy. And we find it quite restful to stand in spots where there is no gravity pull. Too bad you can't try it."

"Thanks, but I'm sure it's just as well," Manning said. "What are you doing out here in space, if you don't mind the question?"

"Not at all," Nar said courteously. "I've been attending a university on Terra and this is a mid-term holiday so I'm on my way home for a couple of weeks. I'm at Ohio University, American Territory, Terra. A freshman." As he added the last, he indicated the cap on his head with some pride.

"I see. By the way, what do I call you —Miss or Mister—?"

"Just call me Nar. You see, we Kholemites actually have no sex such as most of the races of your galaxy have.

"No sex," Manning said in surprise. "Then how do you—or am I getting too personal?"

"Not at all. My race is the dominant one on Kholem, but we do not reproduce. We are acutally the children—although we have no such word in our language—of an entirely different race. The nearest I can translate the name of our parent-race is something like—The Dreaming Old Ones."

"That's another new one on me," said Manning. "Do all of your race look like you?"

"No—not exactly. You see our parent race does nothing but project images of geometric figures which then materialize as my race. But we are many shapes—all geometric and beautiful, if I may say so—and of all colors. It makes a pleasing variety. But I'm afraid we've talked about me so much I have failed to inquire your name."

"Sorry," Manning said. "I'm Manning Draco."

Nar Oysnarn's color changed to a deeper purple. "Not the Manning Draco who is the chief investigator for Greater

Solarian?" he asked in delight. "Oh, this is a pleasure."

"Thank you," Manning said, flattered in spite of himself. "But I must confess that I don't understand why it's a pleasure."

"You're too modest," Nar exclaimed. "Why we studied about you in Freshman Neo-Mentals. You are the only Terran who has ever developed a secondary mind shield." He hesitated and then continued rather eagerly: "You know, there is a legend on my planet—I wonder if you'd mind terribly much permitting me to try to penetrate your mind?"

Manning hesitated. He had the thought that this might be some sort of trap which had been prepared for him, but then he decided that he was being foolish. If his secondary mind shield could withstand the attack of a Rigelian it should be able to take anything this creature could dish out.

"Sure," he said. "Go ahead."

The color of Nar Oysnarn began to fluctuate rapidly, ranging from a royal amethyst to a pale lavender. Almost immediately, Manning felt the alien mind pressing against his primary shield. The pressure increased steadily, then with a sharp thrust was through and striking at his secondary shield. He felt the surge of his own power and knew that the secondary shield would hold without any trouble. But as that knowledge came to him, he received one of the worst shocks of his life. The mental force which attacked him had no chance of penetrating his mind, but on the other hand he was completely paralyzed.

IT LASTED for only a minute and then he felt the force withdraw. As it went, he could move again. He felt a tingling awareness return to all of his muscles.

"What the hell was that?" he demanded when he could talk. There was a combination of fear and anger in his voice.

"I'm sorry, sir," Nar said contritely. "I should have explained it to you, but I was so eager to try it. You see, there has always been a legend on Kholem that if one of my race tried to read the mind of a creature far enough advanced to possess a secondary mind shield the attempt would fail but that the creature would be paralyzed. I was so anxious to see if it were true, I'm afraid I forgot ordinary politeness."

"I guess it's true," Manning said ruefully. "Got any idea of how it works?"

"No," Nar said. "It doesn't work, however, with creatures who possess only a primary shield. I should guess, therefore, that it involves using the very strength that supports such a secondary shield and turning it back on itself in some way."

"Sort of automatically locking all the person's energy," Manning said thoughtfully. He was silent for a minute, then looked up at his geometric companion. "Are you in any special hurry to reach your home, Nar?"

"No, but why do you ask?"

"I'll make a deal with you," Manning said. "Stop off at Alphard VI with me for two or three days and then I'll take you all the way home. I have an idea that you can help me with the case I'm working on now. What do you say?"

"Will I!" Nar exclaimed joyfully. "You bet! Will that be an experience! You see, sir, my room-mate is a conceited ass* from Denebola who's always bragging about his adventures. This will really bring him down a parsec or two."

"Then it's a deal," Manning said. "You got any more surprises for me?"

"I don't believe so," Nar said apologetically. "We Kholemites are really a very ordinary race."

"I can see that," Manning said dryly. "I was about to run an encyclotape on the Alphardians when I stopped to pick you up, so if you'll just sit back and listen, I'll put it through now."

"You won't need to do that, sir," Nar said eagerly. "I can tell you everything that is known about the Alphardians."

*Nar Oysnarn was speaking literally, of course, for as everyone knows the dominant race on Denebola is descended from a variety of the subgenus *Asinus*.

"Everything?"

"Yes, sir. I have an eidetic memory—all of my race do."

"Okay," Manning said, laughing. "Go ahead."

"Yes, sir. Alphard VI is one of ten planets in the system of Alphard. It is the only habitable planet in the system. In size and shape, atmospheric pressure, and gravity it is almost a twin to Terra —if you'd like the exact figures I can provide them—" Manning shook his head and Nar continued, "Alphard VI has seven satellites which follow its orbit so closely that they are always visible. A strange feature of these satellites is that six of the seven revolve around the seventh moon in a very tight, fast moving orbit, and it is said that one will get dizzy watching them for any length of time.

"The race of Alphardians are evolved from the order of Scolopendromorpha, subclass of Epimorpha, being a subdivision of the distinct class Chilopoda in the phylum Arthropoda. Primitive examples of this class of life are found even upon Terra. On Alphard VI, however, while retaining many of the primitive characteristics, the race has evolved in a general humanoid direction. There is in fact a case now pending in court, Alphardians vs. Humanoid Creatures of Galaxy I, which may well result in a ruling that Alphardians are humanoid.

"Alphardians are a proud race, claiming that they are one of the oldest races in Galaxy I. This may well be true as evidence of the existence of their race is found in early periods of many planets, such evidence being found, for example, in the Carboniferous period of the history of Terra. It is interesting to note that the Alphardians claim that it is their race which is responsible for the legend of Centaurs on Terra. One of their historians has written a rather entertaining book on the subject, in which he claims that the centaurs of Alpha Centauri are imposters and upstarts.

"The Alphardian Empire is now in the two thousandth year of the Ix Dynasty, the present ruler being Emperor Romixon. His rule is absolute, with but one exception. Anyone may challenge the emperor to a game of four-dimensional chess* and if the challenger wins he becomes King of Alphard VI for a period of one week. This week is known as the Festival of the Greater Little and. . . ."

Nar Oysnarn's voice droned on, giving facts and citing figures about Alphard VI, until it must be confessed that even Manning Draco fell asleep somewhere between a description of the Alphardian mating habits and the amount of shoe imports in Galactic credits.

BY MID-MORNING of the following day, the ship was nearing Alphard VI. She had just snapped out of magnidrive and Manning was taking over the controls for the approach when the Communicator buzzed. Manning flipped the switch.

"Yes?" he said into the transmitter.

"This is the Imperial War Cruiser, *Remulden*," boomed a voice from the loudspeaker. "Identify yourself and give your destination."

"The *Alpha Actuary*," said Manning, "owned and operated by Terran Manning Draco, headed for Alphard VI on official business for the Greater Solarian

*By this time, four-dimensional chess is played in every civilized part of the Galaxy. For the benefit, however, of any readers who may be from such backward systems as Enif or Beta Crucis, four-dimensional chess was invented by Horace Homer Humptafield, of Terra, in 2983. It was made possible by the now famous Humptafield Penetration Theory [178yb x (bdy — 2z)4] which he had discovered five years earlier. The Penetration Theory, of course, provided the formula for reaching the Fourth Dimension, but was thought to be impractical when it was discovered that it applied only to living protoplasm and certain rare wood fibers. In other words, it was impossible to thrust any scientific instruments into the Fourth Dimension. Small animals were thrust through, but none of them lived so it was thought unsafe for Man to stick his head through and look around. The only exploring possible, therefore, was that which could be done by thrusting an arm and hand into the other dimension. The consensus was that it would be rather silly for a bunch of scientists to stand around waggling their fingers somewhere in the Fourth Dimension, so the whole theory was tossed out by The Science Conference of 2979. Thereafter, it was ignored until Humptafield thought of using it for chess. A duplicate of the regular three-dimensional chess board was set up in the Fourth Dimension, thus enabling a player to project his moves into infinite space. While somewhat complicated, the game proved highly successful until 3201, when Vladimir Smith lost an arm while moving R-KKt3 over 400 for a checkmate. While making the move, Smith's arm was apparently bitten off by some animal native to the Fourth Dimension. Thereafter, the game fell into ill repute until 3315 when the great Horvosa thought of setting up the duplicate board in another room and merely calling out what would be the Fourth Dimensional move. Since then this has been known as the Horvosa Application of the Humptafield Penetration Theory.

Insurance Company, Monoplated. Accompanied by Nar Oysnarn, of the planet Kholem in the Coma-Virgo Galaxy."

"Proceed," said the voice. There was a click as the connection was broken.

"Now what the hell was that about?" muttered Manning. "I haven't heard of any trouble in this section of the galaxy. Why should they have a war cruiser out?"

"Perhaps a holiday or something of the sort," suggested Nar. "The Alphardians are great believers in tradition."

"I remember you said that yesterday," Manning said dryly.

He bent to the task of bringing the ship in. Once, in the viewing screen, he caught a glimpse of the whirling silvery moons over Alphard. When he was a few thousand feet above the planet, he contacted the landing tower and identified himself. The tower provided a landing beam and he relinquished the ship to the force. He watched the blue and scarlet pips chase across the landing scanner. When they merged the ship was in the landing cradle.

Pressures adjusted automatically and the inner and outer doors opened. There was a steady drone of noise from outside as though there were a large crowd on the landing field.

"Well, here we are," Manning said to his companion. "Let's go out and look them over."

"After you," Nar Oysnarn said politely. "It would not be seemly for a mere passenger to show himself before the master of a ship."

Manning Draco grinned, but he had long before learned not to argue with the traditional ideas of creatures from other systems. He walked through the air-lock and stepped out on the field.

For a minute he was blinded by the powerful searchlights set up on the landing field. Then he could see that from the spaceport buildings right up to the edge of his ship was packed with Alphardians. As he appeared, the droning noise was raised to a shout. As he waited for it to die down, Manning gazed in amazement at the crowd which was obviously greeting him.

As is known to all but the most provincial of inhabitants of Galaxy I, the Alphardians are an interesting race. Their bodies proper are very similar to the bodies of primitive centipedes, being all of six feet long, usually a mottled russet brown in color, and supported by a dozen feet on each side*. But where the head would normally appear on a centipede, the Alphardians have the upper trunk and head of humans, rearing up at right angles to the rest of the body. If one ignores the lower part of the body, Alphardian men are handsome and the women beautiful by the strictest Terran standards.

As the shouting of the crowd subsided to a murmur, one Alphardian stepped forward.

"May one inquire your name and origin?" he asked, speaking in flawless English.

"Manning Draco of Terra," Manning said. He turned to indicate Nar Oysnarn. "And this is—"

"Later," said the Alphardian, holding up a hand, "we will be pleased to learn the name of your fortunate companion. But you, Manning Draco, were the first to set foot upon Alphardian soil. Know that this is the Festival of the Greater Little, now in its third day and you are the first alien to arrive among us."

III

SOME FAINT memory tugged at Manning's mind. He had an idea that Nar Oysnarn had told him something about the Festival of the Greater Little which he should remember, but it had been during one of the periods when he was falling asleep and he couldn't trigger it into existence.

"That's very nice," he said vaguely. "Now, if you'll excuse me—"

"You don't understand?" said the young Alphardian. "It is an Alphardian tradition, dating from the first year of

* Industrial statistics show that Terran shoe exports were more than doubled after Alphard VI was admitted to the Federation.

the Ix Dynasty, that the first alien to land on Alphardian soil during this Festival becomes a sacred hero of our race and is known throughout the Festival as the Greater Little. It is my honor, therefore, to proclaim you, Manning Draco, a Greater Little."

"I am honored," Manning said, suppressing his annoyance. It would be just his luck to run into something like this which might interfere with his business. "This is, however, a business trip for me and so I'm afraid that I will have to decline. Now—"

"It is not permitted to decline," the young Alphardian said stiffly. "This is our tradition and it is sacred. May I refer you to the Federation Charter, Clause 7,693, which states that all citizens of the Federation must comply with the traditions and customs of any member planet as long as such traditions and customs are not contrary to the Federation laws."

"He's right, you know," Nar Oysnarn whispered over Manning's shoulder. "I was telling you about this last night. I doubt, however, if it will seriously interfere with your business."

"Okay," Manning said. "So I'm a Greater Little. What next?"

The young Alphardian beckoned and an Alphardian maiden stepped forward. In one hand, she carried a lei of Alphardian shell flowers. From the top of her golden blonde hair down to her waist, she was as beautiful a woman as Manning couldn't ever remember seeing—and in the case of the lei-bearer there was nothing to prevent him from noting her beauty for, like all Alphardians, she wore no clothes on her upper body. By being careful not to look down, Manning began to enjoy himself as she slipped the lei over his head and then kissed him full on the lips.

Her kiss, in fact, almost made him forget her progenitors altogether—but then as he responded to her lips, he had a momentary vision of twenty-four sets of toes curling in ecstasy and he suppressed the more obvious of his thoughts.

"Well, that wasn't so bad," Manning said when the girl stepped back. He grinned at the young Alphardian. "Is that all?"

"Oh, no," that young worthy replied. "First, you must be greeted by His Temporary Majesty, the Festival King of Alphard, after which the ritual of the Greater Little must be observed. . . But here comes the king now."

As he spoke, Manning could see the assembled Alphardians squirming around, packing even closer together, as they made a lane leading to where he stood. There were more shouts and the Alphardians began inclining their heads in the traditional gesture of subservience to royalty. Then Manning's worst possible fears were realized.

Striding through the throng of admiring Alphardians, wearing the royal ermine and looking as if he had always worn it, came Dzanku Dzanku, the Rigelian. Trotting along behind him, carrying the train of the robe, was Sam Warren.

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Manning.

"Ah, what a coincidence," boomed Dzanku, and there was an expression of malicious glee in the three eye-stalks bent toward Manning. "What a pleasant surprise to find that our old friend Manning Draco is to be the Greater Little under our short, but glorious, reign. Isn't this nice, Sam?"

"Yeah, who would've thought it," Sam Warren said with a grin.

Being a typical Rigelian, Dzanku Dzanku weighed all of a ton, Terra scale. He was, however, no taller than Manning Draco. His thick square torso was supported by two tree-like legs. His face was small and expressionless, the three eye-stalks raised a few inches above it. He possessed six tentacles, which just now were fluttering with uncontrollable pleasure.

Sam Warren, on the other hand, was a Terran. He was smaller than Manning, with a crafty face which revealed nothing but the slyness which was his stock in trade.

DESPITE his surprise, as the two inter-galactic confidence men approached, Manning tried a swift mental probe at Sam Warren. He suspected it would be useless and it was. Sam Warren's mind was filled with glee over the arrival of Manning Draco, but there was nothing in his mind which would indicate what he and Dzanku were planning. That synapse had, as usual, been erased.

"Okay," Manning said, turning back to Dzanku. "What's the gag?"

"Gag?" asked Dzanku, his voice filled with mock surprise. "My dear Manning, you are entirely too suspicious. It is true that I was once somewhat annoyed with you when you tricked me so that you could read my mind, but that was a mere childish outburst of the moment. Today I am merely full of the holiday spirit."

"Sure," Manning said, believing none of it. "Then what's the idea of sticking me with this Greater Little business?"

"Sheer accident, my boy—although a fortunate one. I am the king of Alphard for one week, thanks to having bested Emperor Romixon in the small matter of a game of chess. This automatically brings on the Festival of the Greater Little and custom decrees that the first alien to arrive during the Festival becomes the Greater Little. You were fortunate enough to be that first alien. Since I know you are familiar with Terran history, I might point out that the honor is roughly equivalent to being given the key to a city."

"I'm more interested in the key you've given yourself by being king," Manning said. "How much looting are you going to be able to get away with?"

"A crude way of putting it," Dzanku said delicately. "My powers are limited—but adequate. For example, it is one of my duties to determine the sort of ritual required of the alien who becomes the Greater Little."

"So that's it," grunted Manning. "Well you can decide all you like, but I'll have nothing to do with any ritual you set up."

"In that case," said Dzanku, "it will be my sad duty to devise a suitable punishment for you—since a refusal to participate in local traditions is contrary to Federation law. As the temporary sovereign ruler of Alphard, I may punish you as I see fit. I might add that even if the emperor should feel more kindly disposed toward you, under the law he can do nothing about correcting my acts until six months from now."

A Rigelian has never been known to grin, but for a minute Manning thought Dzanku was going to perform that impossible feat. The two of them stared at each other and slowly Manning brought his anger under control.

"Okay," he finally said. "This one is your round, Dzanku. What's the ritual?"

"That will come this evening," Dzanku said. "I believe there are a number of parades and such things involving you during the remainder of the day. But I shall see you at the palace this evening. Your guard—of honor, of course—will bring you there."

He waved his tentacles amiably and turned away. As he walked through the crowd, he spoke to Sam Warren, in tones which easily reached Manning. "Sam," he said, "don't let me forget to contact the war cruiser overhead and tell them that it's all right now to permit the other alien visitors to land. We've kept them waiting long enough."

As Dzanku had promised, there were a number of things which kept Manning busy throughout the day. With Nar Osynarn tagging along, he was paraded through practically every street of the capital city of Ix. He was pelted with flowers, had innumerable leis strung around his neck, and was soundly bussed by dozens of young Alphardian females. He made speeches, laid cornerstones, dedicated schools, and was even a judge, complete with tape measure, of a beauty contest.

In general, there was such an air of good fellowship and the holiday spirit that Manning might have even enjoyed himself if it hadn't been for worrying

about what Dzanku Dzanku and Sam Warren were up to. But every time he found himself getting into the spirit of things, he'd remember the bland countenance of the Rigelian and his pleasure would evaporate.

It was growing dark when, escorted by a large band of Alphardians, Manning Draco went to the palace. He was taken directly to the roof where he found Dzanku and a retinue, which included Sam Warren, waiting.

"Good evening, Manning," Dzanku said gravely. "I trust you have been enjoying the hospitality of my loyal subjects?"

"I could do without the sound of your unctuous voice dribbling into my ears," snapped Manning. "Just get on with the dirty work."

"Tcht, tcht," Dzanku said. "You must get into the spirit of things. Besides I've been told that my voice is most pleasant —well, I suppose that is a matter of personal taste. In the meantime, shall we get on with this pleasant little custom?"

Manning nodded grimly.

"Then, if you will relax over there. . . ." Dzanku indicated a couch arrangement on the roof. To a Terran like Manning Draco, it seemed more arrangement than couch, since it had obviously been built to accommodate the bodies of Alphardian natives. Still it was fairly comfortable, he discovered, since the upper part was built for a humanoid body and his legs could fit into the hollow built to support centipede bodies.

As he lay down, Manning found himself staring up at the Alphardian satellites, the six bright moons chasing each other madly about the seventh one. It was, he thought, one of the high spots among the confusing aspects of the galaxy.

"Now," Dzanku was saying, "all you have to do is relax on that more than comfortable couch throughout the night —and count the number of revolutions made by the moons above you."

Manning glared up at him and the Rigelian's tentacles waved with pleasure.

"Where the hell did you dig up an idea like that?" Manning asked.

"Inspired, isn't it?" Dzanku observed. "But I assure you that it is quite in keeping with the festival. Throughout the history of all planets, rituals of initiation have been to some extent tests of strength or endurance. It is true that I have also been influenced in fixing your ritual by a knowledge of the early history of your own Terra. Perhaps you are familiar with the sort of thing which was popular with Terran university organizations some two thousand years ago. Hazing, I believe it was called."

Manning could only glare his anger.

"By the way," Dzanku continued amiably, "There will be various court attendants around all night to see that you don't go to sleep on the job. And, of course, the usual festival crowd to cheer you on in your efforts. I might also add that a photo-tabulator will be turned on so that we can compare your final count with it to detect any inclination toward non-participation. The penalty for such is apt to be severe—and is determined by myself, naturally. I may occasionally drop back here myself to see how you are getting along. Now, if you'd care to begin. . . ."

MANNING permitted himself the luxury of one more glare, then turned to gaze upward at the whirling moons. He exerted the rigid discipline of his mind, banished his anger, and began counting the revolutions to himself.

"It's really not bad at all," Nar Osynarn whispered from somewhere near his head. "I could tell by the emanations from the Rigelian that he was not well disposed toward you and I feared that he might give you a tough assignment. But this is relatively easy."

Manning grunted to indicate he heard the Kholemite, wryly making a mental note to discover some time what Nar Osynarn considered relatively difficult.

The long slow hours of the night dragged by as Manning Draco counted

the circling moons, his eyes stinging with weariness. Later, it seemed as if the moons were melting into each other and there were times when he felt that he was revolving while the moons remained still. He was vaguely aware of the distant murmur of the crowd and two or three times he thought he heard the voice or caught the thought of Dzanku Dzanku. But the moons moved so rapidly there was no time to check up on fleeting impressions.

He was completely unaware when daylight came to Alphard VI and the moons faded to silvery disks. Finally the mental retreat in which he counted, hidden from the creaking demands of his body, was penetrated by the voice of Dzanku Dzanku and he was aware that it had been repeating the same thing for some time.

"The time is up, Manning," the Rigelian was saying again. "Your trial as a sacred hero of the Festival of the Greater Little is ended."

Slowly, Manning's eyes dragged their gaze away from the moons and focused vaguely on the three eyestalks inclined toward him.

"Ah, you have done nobly," Dzanku said, when he saw that Manning was looking at him. "What was your count for the night?"

Manning sorted through the numbers in his mind until he came to the last one which had registered before he switched his gaze. "Six thousand, eight hundred and forty," he said.

One of Dzanku's eyestalks bent to peer at a tape held in one tentacle. "Excellent," he boomed. "You astound me, my friend. You were within three of the actual count. Permit me to congratulate you."

Manning Draco stumbled to his feet and tried to get a sharper focus on the Rigelian. But he kept seeing the image of whirling moons between them.

"Drop dead," Manning muttered hoarsely. He swayed from exhaustion. It occurred to him that Dzanku may have intended to exhaust him in order to strike mentally and he braced his mind shield. But there was no attack. Dzanku continued to gaze at him with the blandness of a well-meaning Rigelian social worker.

"Okay," Manning said finally. "What do I have to do next?"

Dzanku's tentacles waved reassuringly. "Nothing at all. You are now officially the Greater Little of Alphard VI—a position of only slightly less importance than my own. For the remainder of the Festival there is nothing to do but enjoy yourself. Forget the cares of everyday existence. Be gay. You are now a full-fledged hero and anything on Alphard is yours for the asking—well, almost anything."

"Okay," grunted Manning, "give me a bed and then leave me alone."

Dzanku Dzanku turned to the crowd of Alphardians and waved his tentacles for attention. "My loyal and loving subjects," he said, "escort the honorable Greater Little to your finest hostelry and see that he is provided with a comfortable room. Being a Terran, and therefore of inferior physical endowments, he must repair his manly vigor by sleeping."

Manning Draco was too tired to resent the insult. He followed a number of Alphardians off the palace roof, dimly aware that Nar Oysnarn was still with him. A few minutes later, he scrawled his name in a hotel register and was taken up to a room. He was aware that Nar Oysnarn said something about having the room next to his and then he tumbled into bed. He slept and dreamed that he wore a halo made of spinning moons.

IV

IT WAS the middle of the afternoon when Manning Draco awoke. He was considerably more rested than he had been that morning, but there was still a layer of numbness over his body and mind. He was overly-conscious of the fact that he had been on Alphard VI al-

most twenty-four hours and hadn't done anything for Greater Solarian.

To his surprise his luggage from the ship was in the room. He quickly changed clothes and slipped out of the hotel. Searching along the streets, he found a small restaurant which served Terran food and had his breakfast. Then he went straight to the palace.

The Alphardian who greeted him in the royal chambers was old, with a long white beard covering most of his chest. Like other Alphardians, his humanoid upper half was bare of clothing. His lower body was covered with a lavender silk garment which might have been loosely described as trousers. He wore twelve pair of shoes of gayly-colored Procyon suede, made from the space-cured skins of the giant capellae-mice found on that planet.

"My name is Manning Draco," Manning said. "I want to see Dzanku."

"Dzanku?" repeated the old Alphardian, thoughtfully stroking his beard. "Dzanku? I don't believe—oh, yes! You must mean His Temporary Majesty King Dzanku. Of course. I will announce your presence at once."

The old man ambled across the room, but just before he reached the door he turned and came back, shaking his head.

"I'll have to have your name," he said. "It's the rule, you know. Have to announce everyone."

"But I told you my name. It's Manning Draco."

"Of course, you did." The old Alphardian looked at him shrewdly. "Draco, eh? You must be the new Greater Little." He surveyed Manning and shook his head. "I'm not sure but what we should abandon the custom of the Festival. We seem to be attracting more and more weird specimens. . . Well, I'll announce you. His Temporary Majesty seems to see all sorts."

Once more he ambled across the room, but again turned back just before he reached the door.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but who was it you wanted to see?"

"Dzanku," Manning snapped.

"Your welcome—although I'm sure I don't know why."

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Manning exploded. "I've told you in simple Galactic English that I am Manning Draco and I want to see Dzanku Dzanku, the temporary king of Alphard VI. Can't you keep anything in your mind?"

"I'm sorry," the old Alphardian said, "but I'm rather new at this job. And then I keep thinking that perhaps if I had only moved my King's Knight's pawn to King's Knight three over four into two infinity, I might not have lost. It's an interesting problem."

"King's Knight's pawn," exclaimed Manning. "Then you must be the Emperor of Alphard."

"Not now," said the Emperor, "but I will be again in three days. You know, this is the first time I've ever been beaten. I think I'll pass a law against playing chess with strangers." He sighed heavily. "Oh, well, I suppose I might as well announce you. One of my accursed ancestors made it a rule that the Emperor must serve the temporary king. I must confess it makes me happy to remember that he broke all twenty-four legs when he was courting his seventh wife."

The old man turned away and this time he made it through the door without forgetting his errand. He returned shortly and conducted Manning into the throne room. Dzanku, practically smothered in ermine and with the royal crown perching precariously on one side of his head so as not to interfere with his eyestalks, sat on the throne. Despite the fact that it was designed to accommodate the most royal of Alphardian bodies, Dzanku managed to sit on it with an air of having always belonged there. Sam Warren lounged in a Terran-style chair beside the throne.

"The Greater Little of Alphard, Manning Draco, my friend and yours, is always welcome," Dzanku said pompously. He turned to the old Alphardian and waved a couple of tentacles. "Go away,

Romixon. I'll have no servants snooping around during audiences."

The temporarily unemployed emperor walked across the throne room, but at the door he turned back. There was a worried frown on his face.

"You make me nervous," he complained. He caught the agitation in the Rigelian's eyestalks and added hastily: "Your Temporary Majesty. I have to admit that all the laws you've passed have been all right, but I never know what you're going to do next. After all, I've made a career of being the Emperor of Alphard and I don't like some amateur messing around in it. It would be different if you were a professional. . . I tell you I don't like it."

"You have a low and suspicious nature," Dzanku said blandly. "Now, begone." He waited until the old Alphardian had shuffled out of the room and then turned back to Manning. "What do you want?" he asked bluntly.

"Yeah," chimed in Sam Warren, "what're you up to, Manning?"

"Boys, you got me all wrong," Manning said. "All I want is some information."

"Any time," said Sam Warren, "that Manning Draco says that he doesn't want anything it's a lead-coated cinch there's a Polluxian somewhere in the atom pile. Watch him, Dzanku."

"I shall, old friend," Dzanku said pleasantly. There was a wariness in his eyestalks. "What kind of information, Manning?"

"The relationship between the Galaxy Insurance and Benefit Association and this thing of you being king," Manning said. "I don't know how you worked it to pull this festival racket just as you and Sam are starting your new business, but it's obvious that you'll squeeze every advantage out of the position. I want to know what you've done so far."

"I fail to see how this is the concern of Greater Solarian," Dzanku said.

"Easy," Manning answered with a grin. "We've been notified that a number of our policy holders will not keep up their policies in the future, but in the meantime have made you the beneficiary during the remaining time the policy is in force."

"Ah, yes, our trade-in program. A rather brilliant touch, I thought."

"But what business is it of yours?" Sam Warren added.

"We don't like to have the same person or same company," said Manning, "be the beneficiary on so many policies. You boys ought to know how such things upset J. Barnaby Cruikshank. It makes for too much temptation for fraud."

DZANKU ogled Manning piously. "Perish the thought," he sympathised. "But everything Sam and I have done here on Alphard has been completely legitimate. In fact, you could easily learn all about it from the records so I might as well tell you. Sam and I are the sole owners of a corporation known as the Galaxy Insurance and Benefit Association. We are an Alphardian corporation. Since we are the first local corporation to be formed for the purpose of insurance, under local laws no other local group can go into competition with us for at least two years."

"How did you manage a local corporation since neither you nor Sam are citizens of Alphard?"

"Emperor Romixon," Dzanku said, "owns one share of stock in the corporation and is the chairman of our Board of Directors—at a generous annual stipend, I might add. Up to about a week ago, in open competition with Greater Solarian, we had sold about two thousand insurance polices due to our generous trade-in offer. But I assure you we have no intention of arranging for the—ah—demise of those policy holders. What we'd collect from Greater Solarian would only have to be paid to the heirs on our own policies."

"Uh-huh," said Manning. "That covers anything nicely up to a week ago. But four days ago you became the temporary ruler of Alphard. What has happened since then?"

"I admit the business outlook has improved," Dzanku said mildly while Sam Warren grinned. "I presume you know that the emperors of Alphard have always been great lovers of chess, thereby accounting for the tradition which permits anyone who beats the emperor to be king for one week. I enjoy the game myself in a modest way and it was by a fortunate chance that I defeated Emperor Romixon."

"I'll bet," murmured Manning.

"Since becoming king," Dzanku continued, "I have introduced a certain amount of socially-minded legislation—you know I've always been interested in economics. First, in the interest of national welfare, I have passed a law which permits only Alphardian companies to sell insurance. The matter of the security of the relatives of a bereaved one should not be subject to the whims of inter-planetary speculation." He paused.

"Which means cutting out Greater Solarian and all other companies of the Federation," said Manning, "and leaving your little company with a veritable insurance monopoly on Alphard VI?"

"You might put it that way," Dzanku said, "although the monopoly is good for only two years. In addition to this, I have also passed a law which makes it necessary for every Alphardian citizen to carry not less than five thousand credits worth of life insurance. As a result, the Galaxy Insurance and Benefit Association has, during the past four days, sold two hundred and twenty million insurance policies with more orders coming in. It has, I must admit, been a most satisfactory week, so far."

"And I suppose," Manning said bitterly, "that you and Sam will put the advance premiums in your pockets and blast off a few hours before your reign is over—since the Emperor can certainly do something about those two laws once he's back on the throne."

"On the contrary," Dzanku said, "we are thinking of staying around. There will be three more days in which I can pass laws and there are untold possibilities on this little planet. I assure you that the Emperor will not rescind my laws."

"Why not?"

"He can't. No Emperor, or even temporary Festival king, can pass a law which is harmful to either the people of Alphard or to the Crown. My first law, limiting the selling of insurance to only local companies, is obviously to the benefit of Alphardians and to change it would be harmful to the people. In my second law, I was thoughtful enough to include a clause which puts a special ten percent tax on all insurance benefits. This goes directly into the coffers of the Emperor. Therefore, he cannot repeal that law either."

"Of all the barefaced robbery," began Manning.

"But legal," interrupted Dzanku. "I'm afraid, my dear Manning, that Greater Solarian is through here on Alphard and there is nothing you or J. Barnaby can do about it. You might as well close up the branch office while you're here."

MANNING DRACO had a suspicion that this was true. It looked very much like he and J. Barnaby had both been bested for the first time in their lives. But he wasn't admitting it yet.

"Maybe," he said. "But tell me something, Dzanku. Why did you go to all the trouble of holding other alien ships up above the planet until I arrived? Why did you want me to be elected the Greater Little?"

"I'm a generous person," said Dzanku grandly. "I knew that there was no way that Sam and I could lose and that you were making a long trip for nothing. So, in a sentimental moment, I thought it would be nice to let you share in the Festival honors."

"It also gave you a chance to make me count those damn moons until my eyes were popping out," Manning growled. "And *that* sounds more like you."

"You wound me deeply," Dzanku said. "Now, if you will excuse us—there is the small matter of some special tax exemp-

tions I'd like to work out. You know, despite one of the oldest proverbs of which you Terrans boast, I've discovered that there is a royal road to happiness." He waved his tentacles in dismissal.

Manning Draco left the palace, but think as he could he was unable to detect even the slightest flaw in Dzanku's work. An hour with a leading Alphardian lawyer proved his worst fears to be justified. After leaving the attorney's office, he entered a public visibooth and put through a call to J. Barnaby Cruikshank on Terra. It was a good thing that the call was scrambled for when the news was broken to J. Barnaby, the head of Greater Solarian ran through a string of profanity which would have made a space pirate, or a Fomalhautian pleasure queen, turn green with envy. When he finished, J. Barnbay's face was a choleric shade and he was out of breath—but he still had enough breath for a final order.

"'You stay there and fix it," he said, "or don't ever show your face here again. I don't care how you do it, or what it costs, but get those two!" With that he broke the connection.

It was getting dark as Manning Draco walked along the main street of the City of Ix on Alphard VI. There was a festival air to the whole city—one which Manning did not share. The streets were filled with gay Alphardians. Many of them recognized him and two or three groups tried to carry him off to private parties. He shook them off as kindly as possible. For once in his life, Manning even failed to enjoy the fact that every few feet he was on the receiving end of feminine caresses and kisses. He submitted but his heart wasn't in it.

When a man is in the mood Manning was, there are only two things he can do—and this has not changed between the days when man drove a yoke of oxen and when he flashed from sun to sun in slim space cruisers. Since it was impossible to smash J. Barnaby in the face and there could be little satisfaction in using a visiscreen to tell him where to stuff his job, Manning Draco turned into the first bar he came to.

It was a combination bar and night club and there was a young Alphardian female on the stage singing. It was a currently popular Alphardian song and measured by Alphardian morals it was a pretty risqué number*. The Alphardian males were whistling and stamping their feet to show their appreciation as Manning made his way up to the bar.

The bartender caught sight of Manning at the bar and hurried over.

"We are honored," he said. "With what can we give you pleasure?"

"What's your strongest drink?" Manning wanted to know.

"A Sabikian *Prohna,*" the bartender said, "distilled from the wild *Proh* which grow only on Sabik II. But it is very strong and—"

"Good," interrupted Manning. "I'll have one."

A few minutes later, the bartender set a tall glass in front of him. It was filled with a green liquor which seemed to be shot through with amber streaks. Pale smoke curled up from the top of the glass. Manning lifted it and tossed half of the contents down his throat. Then he hurriedly set the glass down and gripped the bar with both hands. He could feel the flames in his throat and there was a reeling sensation in his head which made the whole room spin. That passed quickly but it was another two minutes before he could make his throat muscles work.

"You're right about it being strong," he said hoarsely. "How much do I owe you?"

"But nothing," said the bartender. "During the Festival, no Alphardian business man will knowingly accept money from the Greater Little. And, by Ix, I've never seen one before who could toss off half a glass of *Prohna.*"

*In English, the title of the song was "Unbutton your shoes and I'll be over." Later, the song became popular all over the Galaxy, but was considered a comedy song on most other planets.

"Fools rush in," Manning muttered, more to himself than to the bartender. He gingerly tried the drink again and discovered that if he sipped it the results were not quite so explosive.

The singer was replaced by a team of Alphardian tap dancers. At first, Manning was amused, but the thudding of twenty-four pair of feet soon began to annoy him. He finished his drink and left.

Farther down the street, he entered another bar and ordered a *Prohna*. He sipped it and turned to watch the floorshow. A sense-teaser was under the spotlight, gyrating slowly to the music. She was half beautiful—that is, her upper half was beautiful—but to anyone not educated to the Alphardian moral code her strip act was only funny. As she danced around, she would lean over and carefully remove one shoe which she then tossed to a shouting admirer at the ringside tables. Then she slowly danced out of range of the spotlight until the applause recalled her to repeat the act with another shoe.

Four barrooms and five *Prohnas* later, Manning Draco walked down the street feeling no pain. He was filled with love for the creatures of the universe, be they man or beast or a bewildering cross between. So all-embracing was this love, in fact, that he beamed with affection when he saw the royal conveyance coming along the street bearing His Temporary Majesty, King Dzanku Dzanku. He waved wildly and six tentacles returned the greeting.

"Having a wonderful time," Manning shouted. "Wish you were here."

"Peace be with you," Dzanku called and Manning thought it was rather stuffy of him. But somehow the phrase also made him feel good and he decided it called for a drink. He headed for his fifth bar.

V

IT WAS just after he'd taken his first sip of the *Prohna* that he saw her. A Terran—an Earth girl. And so beautiful, so breath-taking, that Manning knew it was real and not the result of the Sabikian drinks. From the top of her golden red hair to the bottom of her small feet she was in every respect his dream girl. He grasped his drink firmly, moved around a number of half-drunken Alphardians, apologizing as he stepped on three feet of one of them, and slid into a place beside her at the bar.

Her name was Jadyl Genten—a name that was like music to him, although perhaps it was the voice with which she told him. She had been feeling lonely, surrounded by Alphardians, and was as happy to see another human face as he was. Over his *Prohna* and her Acruxian *Leeba* highball, they exchanged the sort of information which passes quickly between two enchanted people. She liked all the things he liked, hated the things he couldn't stand, longed for the things which were his heart's desires—and before long the glow which came from standing beside her far surpassed the smoky warmth of his drink.

They had dinner at a little place around the corner. Although its ability to provide Terran food was only passable, the fact that they ate together made the cuisine superb. They drank cool green wine, imported from Al Na'ir, and afterward they danced to the disturbing music of an Alphardian string quartet.

Later, they went up to his hotel room —mostly to get away from the fact that the Alphardians couldn't forget that he was a part of their festival. Manning Draco had dropped all of the wise mannerisms which had so long marked his presence with women and it was important that they be alone.

There, in the hotel, he sat at her feet and softly recited the great love poems of a hundred planets. And like a good Earth man, who explores the galaxy before settling down at home, he came at last to a love poem of the old Earth.

As always, it was the tale of a man and a maid and when he reached the part concerning their first kiss, Jadyl leaned over and kissed him. He recited no more poetry that night.

The two days which followed were dreamlike in their ecstasy. The visicreen crackled calls and he ignored it. There were rappings at the door and once the anxious voice of Nar Oysnarn outside, but he paid no attention. Then, on the morning of the third day, as he sat telling Jadyl of older dreams, while she nodded with understanding and sometimes agreement, the door opened. Into the room stepped Nar Oysnarn, a passkey dangling from his hand. His purple body was so pale it was almost white, but there was a determined look on his trianguar face.

Nar Oysnarn advanced into the room. He ignored the Terran girl and at first Manning Draco was annoyed, but then he decided that it was only the tactful politeness of one from another culture.

"You will forgive me," Nar Oysnarn said politely but firmly, "but you asked me for my help and I am here to render it."

"Your help?" Manning asked and then only vaguely remembered that he'd had some thought of using Nar's peculiar powers against Dzanku.

"Yes," Nar said firmly. "And while I realize that you have probably decided not to tackle your case until the Rigelian is no longer king, it is my belief that this is a mistake. He is most vulnerable who has the most power. And since this is the last day of the Festival, I respectfully suggest that you must act today."

While it was true that forty-eight hours earlier, Manning Draco would have happily permitted the Greater Solarian Insurance Company to go smash, and it was equally true that he hated to leave Jadyl for even one minute, he was now doubly aware of his responsibility to others.

"You're right," he told Nar. He turned to Jadyl and ran his fingers playfully through her hair. "You stay here, honey," he said, "while I go take care of some business. It won't take long and then you and I will head for earth." Nar watched him stonily.

He went jauntily through the door, followed by Nar Oysnarn, and out of the hotel.

"What is your plan?" Nar asked when they were on the street.

It was there, with the sharp Alphardian wind blowing some of the tendrils of perfume from his mind, that Manning Draco forced himself to put all of his mind to the business of Greater Solarian. He looked at the little Kholemite in consternation. "I'll be damned if I know," he confessed. "Originally, I did have an idea whereby with your help I could tie Dzanku up in knots. But Dzanku being even the temporary king of this screwy planet makes the original plan dangerous. If only Dzanku hadn't challenged the Emperor to chess—" He broke off and stared into space.

For the first time since he'd landed on Alphard, Manning Draco's brain had begun to work. The first day had been taken up with anger and frustration and the strain of counting the revolutions of the moons. The next two days had been lost in romance. Now, all at once, he thought he saw the solution. With a sensation of guilt, he felt that it was a solution he should have seen at once.

"I think I've got it," he said to Nar. "Come on."

THEY went first to the Royal Alphardian Library where Manning pored over the Constitution of Alphard VI. After that, he spent a few minutes in the general reading room of the Inter-Planetary Annex. Only a few minutes were needed, for Manning possessed an eidetic mind and when he left, the pages he'd read were firmly impressed in his memory. With Nar Oysnarn puffing to keep up, they headed for the palace.

The same old Alphardian, he who was Emperor Romixon, was in the anteroom as they entered. He seemed to have lost the vacant stare of two days before and there was a glint of recognition in his eyes as he looked at Manning.

"I suppose you want to see Dzanku?" he grumbled.

"If you please," Manning said.

"All right, but I tell you I'm pretty sick of this whole thing. I'll be mighty glad when tomorrow comes. Why, I don't know how everyone stands it being commoners. Who's that with you?"

"Nar Oysnarn, of the planet Kholem, Coma-Virgo Galaxy. He's a friend of mine."

"You Terrans will take up with anyone," the old Alphardian sneered. He went into the throne room, but was soon back. "He'll see you," he said curtly.

They followed him into the throne room and there was Dzanku once more lolling on the throne, with Sam Warren nearby. Both of them were obviously pretty well pleased with themselves.

"You may leave, chamberlain," Dzanku said to the old Alphardian. "It's nice to see you, Manning. Where have you been keeping yourself?"

"Let Romixon stay," Manning said. "He'll be interested in what I have to say."

"Oh, very well," Dzanku said, waving a tentacle agreeably. "What's on your mind, Manning?"

"I am here," Manning announced, "to challenge you to a game of four-dimensional chess."

The Rigelian lost his amiability. "What's the gag?" he snapped.

"No gag at all," Manning said cheerfully. "You and I are going to play a game of chess, with the throne you're now occupying going to the winner. In other words, if I beat you, I become king of Alphard."

"You can't do that," declared Dzanku. "You have to challenge the Emperor—which means you'll have to wait until tomorrow."

"Wrong, Dzanku. The Constitution of Alphard merely says that anyone can challenge the *ruler* of the planet, and therefore this applies to the temporary ruler as well as to the regular one."

"Is that right, Romixon?" Dzanku demanded.

"He's right," the old Alphardian said gloomily. "But I wish all of you would stop acting as if my throne were a credit someone tossed on the dice table. It's undignified. I've got a notion to secede from the Federation and ban all Terrans and Rigelians from my planet." Suddenly his face brightened. "I just remembered something," he said, speaking to Manning. "Even if you win you won't be able to keep me from becoming Emperor again tomorrow. The Constitution says that no one Festival can last more than one week and that only one Festival is permitted in any six months period."

"That's true," Manning said, "and I had no intention of trying to keep you from resuming the throne. But if I win, I'll be king for this last day of the Festival."

"Okay, I'll play you," Dzanku said. "There hasn't been a Terran born who could beat a Rigelian in four dimensional chess—why do you think my planet has held the Galactic Championship for the past two hundred years? And don't think you'll catch me with a cheap trick like you did the last time—it wouldn't help you any even if it were possible."

"I wouldn't think of it," Manning said.

Dzanku pushed a button on the throne and a number of footmen rushed in. He sent them after the chess board and pieces. Within a few minutes, a regulation three dimensional chess board had been set up in the throne room. A similar board, representing the fourth dimension, was set up in another room and the two rooms were connected by audio. Dzanku generously offered to let Manning send a representative into

the other room to see that the moves were made as called, but Manning just as generously declined.

Dzanku won the choice and took the white. The game started, with Sam Warren, Nar Oysnarn, and Romixon as the only audience.

FOR the first few moves, both players moved in three dimensions only. Dzanku led off with the well-known Queen's Knight Gambit developed by Tanalov in the 28th Century and Manning countered with standard moves. But within a few minutes, both players were widening the scope of play to include simple moves into infinity. As they reached the middle game, Dzanku set up a pawn sacrifice on the third level of play.

Manning studied the board for a minute, then leaned back in his chair, running one hand through his hair.

"I move," he said, taking advantage of the rule which permitted a player to call the move on an infinity play, with the pieces being adjusted later, "my queen to king's rook's four; to six over queen's knight's three; to queen's bishop three over four into three infinity . . . I believe that's a mate."

The Emperor Romixon sighed heavily and looked at Manning Draco with considerably more respect. He was the only one to recognize it as the same daring move which in 3316 had cost the great Horvosa the championship of the galaxy*.

Dzanku Dzanku poised one tentacle over the board and then froze in that attitude. A close observer might have noticed that Nar Oysnarn also seemed to be unduly preoccupied.

Manning Draco turned to Romixon. "I should like to remind you," he said, "of the rule, accepted several years ago by the Galactic Chess Rules Committee, which states that on any move in the fourth dimension which results in a mate must be answered by the opposing player within a time limit of two minutes. Failure to do so forfeits the game."

The old Alphardian nodded. "I'm aware of the rule," he said testily. "Thirty seconds have already elapsed."

"Hey, what goes on here," Sam Warren said. "What's the matter, Dzanku? . . . Dzanku!"

THE Rigelian gave no evidence of having heard his partner. He still crouched over the board, his three eyes fixed immovably on the pieces, one tentacle still poised in the air. Manning Draco noticed that red veins had suddenly appeared in his eyes and they looked as if they might pop out of their stalks any minute.

It was a curious tableau, lasting for the next ninety seconds. Both Dzanku and Nar Oysnarn sat as though carved from stone. Romixon kept his eyes on the chronometer fastened to one of his fore-legs. Manning Draco leaned back in his chair and relaxed. Little Sam Warren became more and more agitated as he urged Dzanku to do something—anything.

"The two minutes are up," Romixon announced. "Manning Draco is the new temporary king of Alphard VI and may rule—" he glanced at his fore-leg—"for the next twenty-one hours and thirty-six minutes."

"Permit me to be the first to congratulate Your Temporary Majesty," Nar Oysnarn suddenly said.

There was a roar of rage from Dzanku Dzanku. He leaped to his feet, tentacles waving wildly, scattering chess board and pieces in every direction.

"I've been cheated," he bellowed, his three eyes bulging with anger. "The whole thing is illegal. That creature there—" a sweeping tentacle indicated Nar Oysnarn—"did something that paralyzed me. The rules state that no special powers are permitted."

"I didn't see him do anything," Romixon said maliciously. "According to

*Lest some reader who is not giving his undivided attention to this account jump to the conclusion that Manning Draco has an **Ubermensch** psychosis, it should be made clear that this was the first game of chess he had ever played. He had merely memorized a number of games, so there was nothing very spectacular about his feat.

the law, Manning Draco is now king of Alphard."

For a minute, Manning thought Dzanku was going to charge all of them. The big Rigelian was so angry he was quivering like a ton of jelly.

"By the way, Romixon," Manning said casually, "what is the penalty for assaulting a ruler of Alphard?"

"Exile to the third moon," Romixon said. "It sometimes takes as long as eighteen months for a creature to die there, although the mind cracks after eight or nine months, I understand."

With a visible effort, Dzanku restrained his anger. "All right, Draco," he said hoarsely, "you win this round. But there's nothing you can do to recall the laws I've passed. And I'll get around to you when the Festival is over. Come on, Sam."

Followed by Sam Warren, Dzanku stomped from the throne room.

The old Alphardian was doubled up with laughter, the tears streaming down his face.

"Oh, dear," he said firmly, "I haven't enjoyed myself so much since the day my father, the Emperor Dumixon, broke his silly neck while playing some alien game introduced by you Terrans." He stopped laughing and glared at Manning. "But don't you start messing up my kingdom now. At least, Dzanku fixed it so that I make a tidy little profit, so don't get any ideas you're going to take it away from me."

"I wouldn't think of it," Manning said. "But there is one thing we'd better do quickly. What is the process for passing a law on this planet?"

"Why?" Romixon asked suspiciously.

"Dzanku was angry when he left here and still filled with a desire for revenge, but once he's cooled off he may decide it's better to make sure of keeping his profit. I want to stop him from leaving here with all the money he's collected so far."

"In here," Romixon said quickly, leading the way into the next room. "Hurry up! Don't let him get away with all of that beautiful cash . . . There—all you do is write the new law on the visiscribe and sign your name. It then appears on the public screen and in all police courts and is an established law. But hurry!"

VI

MANNING stepped over to the visiscribe, picked up the electronic pencil and wrote: *No alien is permitted to leave the planet Alphard VI during the Festival of the Greater Little nor may any money be sent from the planet without a special permit signed by the ruler. King Manning.*

"There," he said, turning back to Romixon, "that will keep him from leaving or sending the money out to a confederate. Tell me, does an ex-king have any immunity from the laws of the planet?"

"No," Romixon said and it was obvious from his grin that he was contemplating the future of more than one ex-king. "Although," he added reluctantly, "with the exception of murder or a royal assault, prison sentences for actions during Festival week cannot be for more than six months."

"Even six months in prison will do Dzanku good," Manning said cheerfully. "Well—to work."

"Wait a minute," Romixon said hastily. "Let's not go off half-shoed. You really ought to discuss everything with me before going ahead. After all, I have had more experience in this business than you have."

"Okay—but don't try to stall me, Romixon."

The Alphardian started to pout, but then changed his mind. "How did you get the best of Dzanku?" he asked curiously.

"Nar Oysnarn," Manning said, indicating his young friend. "He has a strange ability which works only with those who have secondary mind shields —as Dzanku does. If Nar tries to read such a creature's mind it causes paraly-

sis. When I leaned back and ran my hand through my hair, Nar merely tried to read Dzanku's mind."

"Then you did cheat," Romixon said. "Maybe I could declare the whole thing illegal and take over right now . . ."

"Wrong," Manning said. "The rules state that a *player* may not use special powers in order to win—and I used no special powers. Nar Oysnarn was not a player and I cannot be held responsible for the fact that his curiosity made him try to read my opponent's mind."

Romixon glared at him. "What are you going to do now?" he demanded.

"Well, first, I'm going to pass a law stating that no alien is permitted to directly make a profit on any business which may involve the death of one or more Alphardians. Since insurance does involve the death of the insured, this means that no alien may profit *directly* from insurance on this planet. I think you'll agree this is a law which is good for Alphard."

"Y-yes," Romixon said uncertainly. "But that will also mean that your company, Greater Solarian, can't sell insurance here either."

"That's right," Manning said cheerfully.

Romixon scratched his beard thoughtfully. "There has to be a catch in it," he grumbled. "You Terrans don't give things away. There must be an angle somewhere."

"Maybe," Manning said. "Incidentally, I will also pass a law confiscating for the crown all receipts and assets of any company incorporated in Alphard for the purpose of selling such insurance. Since the Galaxy Insurance and Benefit Association is the only such company, it means we will confiscate everything that Dzanku and Warren own."

"This I like," Romixon said.

"First, however, I will pass a law making it a crime for any alien to possess money which comes from the sale of anything involving the life or death of an Alphardian. Then we arrest Dzanku and Warren, throw them in jail, and then confiscate their business."

"Good," said Romixon, stamping his twenty-four feet with glee.

"Then," Manning said, "I'm going to nationalize insurance on this planet. In other words, the laws Dzanku passed requiring all Alphardians to carry insurance will still stand, but all insurance policies will be sold by the government."

"That sounds a little like socialism," Romixon said cautiously. "I'm not sure that it's right for an emperor to have anything to do with subversive ideas."

"Not at all. It would be socialism if the government was the people, but since you are—or will be again in a few hours—the government, it'll actually be you who owns the insurance company."

"That sounds logical," the Emperor agreed.

"Of course," Manning continued blandly, "it is a matter of Federation law that all insurance companies must have available assets to cover the values of policies issued. Therefore, I will have to pass a law freezing enough of the royal holdings to equal the value of the insurance policies."

"You'll have to—*what?*" screamed Romixon. He jumped up and down with rage, the sound of his twenty-four feet like thunder. "That'll tie up every cent I own! You can't do that to me! I'll declare war!"

"And fight the whole Federation?"

THE anger went out of Romixon. "Please," he said. "Why did you have to come here? I was so happy before. Now you're going to make a pauper out of me—I won't have a palace to my name. What will become of me in my old age?"

"There is one other way to handle it," Manning said thoughtfully.

Romixon went down on twenty-four knees, clasped his hands together. "Have pity on a poor old despot," he said. "Handle it the other way. Leave my few remaining years untouched by the dreadful pinch of penury."

"Let me get one thing straight," Manning said. "If I pass a law which benefits both you, as the Emperor, and the citizens of Alphard, that law cannot be repealed in any way—can it?"

"Absolutely not," declared the Alphardian. "And in addition, I give you my word of honor.

"Okay, we'll do it this way. We'll nationalize insurance, which makes you the insurance company of Alphard. But because an Emperor cannot become an insurance broker without the loss of a certain amount of dignity, the government will then sub-contract the Greater Solarian Insurance Company to furnish all policies, put up the necessary assets, and pay all benefits. As the original contractor, the government—which is you—will receive a regular sales commission on every policy. How's that?"

"Splendid," Romixon exclaimed, leaping to his feet. "My boy, you have saved the throne of Alphard. I will never forget you for this." But there was a gleam deep within his eyes which reminded Manning Draco that the last sentence could have more than one meaning. Mentally, he resolved to leave Alphard VI slightly in advance of the time his reign would be over.

"Then I'd better get to work," he said.

The remainder of the morning was a busy one. Manning Draco carefully checked the wording of each law with the best lawyer on the planet, then passed them. He had the police round up Dzanku and Warren. To be sure that nothing went wrong, Manning sat behind the national judge while both of them were sentenced to prison. Then he saw to the confiscation of the property, had all of the policies transferred, and made sure that the contract between the government of Alphard and Greater Solarian was without loopholes and that one copy went off to be filed in the Federation archives.

Then he called the home office on Terra. The news that Dzanku and Warren were in jail and that Greater Solarian now carried policies on every single Alphardian instead of only a few million brought an expression of sublime bliss to the face of J. Barnaby Cruikshank. In fact, he was so carried away that he rashly offered a large bonus to his chief investigator. Manning made him put it into writing and hold the signed sheet up in front of the visiscreen. Then he broke the connection.

It was lunch time. A triumphant Manning Draco, feeling better than he had since landing, went back to the hotel to have lunch with Jadyl Genten.

She wasn't in the room. No one in the hotel recalled having seen her leave. Manning, still king, ordered out the entire Alphardian police force. Inch by inch, they searched the city, and then later the entire planet, but there was no sign of the Terran girl. The officials of the spaceport swore that not a single ship had left.

Manning was frantic, but the fact was not changed. Jadyl Genten was nowhere to be found. At first, he suspected the Emperor but he finally became convinced that the old Alphardian was telling the truth when he said that he'd never heard of the girl. Inasmuch as during the questioning, Manning had been a little rough with the emperor, it became even more important to leave before the time came for Romixon to regain his throne.

The only other thing which seemed plausible was that Dzanku had found some way to spirit her away in revenge. Sending Nar Oysnarn on to the ship at the spaceport, Manning Draco went to Ix Prison.

For reasons not too difficult to understand, Dzanku Dzanku was still not in the best humor and the sigh of Manning Draco did nothing to improve it. He gripped the bars of his cell with all six tentacles and glared until his eyestalks quivered.

"I'm going to ask you something," Manning said grimly, "and you'd better give me the right answers."

"I wouldn't give you the fumes of an old broken-down rocket," Dzanku said

just as grimly. "Why don't you go off on a long vacation with Jadyl Genten?"

"Then you do know something about her," shouted Manning. He leaned close to the bars and Terran and Rigelian stared angrily at each other. "What did you do with her?"

"I didn't do anything with her," Dzanku said. "In fact, I wouldn't have anything to do with her under any circumstances."

"Where is she?"

"Why don't you ask that little purple monstrosity that tags around after you? He helped you to get a throne."

"I'll make you talk," Manning declared.

"How?" Dzanku said. "You can't give me any more than the six months I'm already serving."

"Then tell me where she is and I'll let you go free."

"I'd rather stay in jail and watch you go crazy," Dranku said, and for the first time he regained some of his good humor. "Go away."

STRAIGHTENING up, Manning Draco sent the full force of his mind slashing at the Rigelian. He felt it strike the secondary shield and lock there. For a full minute, the two of them stood there, straining. The sweat poured from Manning's face and Dzanku's eyes bulged. But their strength was equal and neither shield would give way. Finally, Manning staggered and leaned wearily against the bars. Dzanku sank down on the prison stool, his eyestalks drooping.

"Dzanku," Manning said, "be a good guy. You and I have fought each other, but we never hurt other people in the effort to get each other. Tell me where she is?"

"I'll give you some good advice," Dzanku said wearily. "It's less than an hour before Romixon becomes Emperor again. If you're still on this planet then, you'll be right here in jail with me and for a damn sight longer than six months. Beat it and forget about Jadyl. You'll never see her again. Besides there was something wrong with her or she would have worked better."

"What do you mean?"

But Dzanku Dzanku had gone to sleep, his tentacles wrapped around his head, and Manning knew there was no use trying to awaken a Rigelian when he didn't choose to be aroused. He turned and walked from the prison, his shoulders slumping.

It lacked only twenty minutes before the end of the Festival when Manning Draco arrived at the spaceport. A number of cheering Alphardians tried to keep him from reaching his ship, but he knew this had to be the influence of Romixon at work and he shoved roughly through.

Nar Oysnarn was already within the ship and Manning didn't even bother getting a clearance from the tower. He merely switched the ship into magnetic power and the *Alpha Actuary* leaped skyward. There were still five minutes to spare when the little ship flashed beyond the atmosphere of Alphard VI.

Manning fed the position of Kholem, in the Coma-Virgo Galaxy, into the automatic pilot, threw the ship into magni-drive and relapsed into a sulky silence which lasted until they landed on Kholem. Nar Oysnarn tried to start a conversation several times, but earned only a glare for his trouble.

"Okay, kid," Manning said, setting the ship down on the planet. "Here you are. Thanks for everything and goodbye."

Looking unhappy, Nar Oysnarn started for the airlock. But just then Manning Draco remembered something and he grabbed the Kholemite back so fast the cap flew off his head.

"I just remembered," Manning said grimly," when I was trying to make Dzanku tell me where Jadyl was, he wanted to know why I didn't ask you. What did he mean by that?"

"Was she that beautiful?" Nar asked softly.

"You know she was. You saw her."

Nar Oysnarn shook his head. "No," he said, "that's what I've been trying to tell you. I didn't see her. Neither did anyone else."

"What the hell do you mean?" Manning asked angrily.

"You know." Nar said, "that all over your galaxy the Alphardians have had the reputation of being eccentric—but do you know just why they are eccentric?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Everything. The Alphardians are eccentric because they live out their lives beneath six moons which constantly whirl around a seventh one. Those moons are always in sight. The result is that everyone on Alphard is always in a slight hypnotic trance."

"Hypnosis?"

NAR OYSNARN nodded. "That's why Dzanku Dzanku worked out that ritual of making you look at the moons all night. He put you in deep hypnosis. He was there for a long time that night and I was sure he was in telepathic communication with you, but it didn't occur to me that he was hypnotizing you until later. Then it was too late."

"Not Jadyl," Manning said violently. "You saw her when you broke into my room this morning."

"No," Nar said gently. "You were sitting there by yourself. Think back and you'll realize that no one saw her but you. The Alphardians probably paid no attention because they merely figured you were also eccentric."

Against his will, Manning thought back to that evening in the bar, on the street, and in the restaurant.

Try as he did, he couldn't remember anyone else speaking to Jadyl or even looking at her.

"I can't believe it," he said.

"She was a post-hypnotic suggestion," Nar said firmly. "I'm sure that what happened was that Dzanku gave you some key word or sentence which would trigger the image later."

Manning was remembering meeting Dzanku on the street that night and the Rigelian's strange greeting—"Peace be with you"—which was so out of character for him.

"And," continued Nar, "I think that when Dzanku was paralyzed by the contact with my mind the hypnotic control was broken and she vanished. That's the reason why you couldn't find her afterward."

Manning Draco sat, feeling a dream fade away into nothing, and feeling a little sorry for himself.

"But how did he make her so perfect? She liked everything I liked, seemed even to anticipate my likes and dislikes."

"I think," Nar said slowly, "that the hypnotic control made you see a feminine version of yourself—and therefore her every taste would be identical with your own. I imagine that Dzanku believed this would be such a perfect vision that there would be no danger of your spoiling his plans."

"And that's what he meant in the prison when he said there was something wrong with her or she would have worked better," Manning said, believing against his will.

There was little more to be said and Manning Draco didn't feel like small talk.

He soon said goodbye to Nar Oysnarn and the *Alpha Actuary* blasted off from Kholem.

As he streaked back toward his own galaxy, Manning Draco began to remember more of the conversation he had held in the prison with Dzanku Dzanku. And the more he remembered, the greater was his anger. So great that he knew he had to do something to get even. But what could he do to one who was in prison on a planet where it was probably unsafe for him to land—then, realizing the lusty nature of the Rigelian and the fact that he would be shut up for at least another six months, Manning had an idea.

He landed briefly at the outlaw planet of the Deneb system—Deneb XIV. There, after some shopping around

among the shifty street vendors, he purchased some Rigelian postcards—enough to supply one for each day of six months. And since, as everyone knows, Rigelian postcards can't be sent through the mails, he found a method to smuggle them into the prison on Alphard VI. He was directed to a salesman who traveled for an import house, and handled a number of illegal items on the side, who would arrange it for a price.

As small as the gesture was, it made him feel better. By the time he was reaching the Solar System, his thoughts were once more centered about Lhana Xano. Manning Draco was again on course.

Back on Alphard VI, Dzanku Dzanku cursed violently in ten languages and three crustacean dialects as the first postcard turned up in his breakfast cereal. Once, in his youth, he had known the model.

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SURVIVAL

I

AS THE SPACEPORT bus trundled unhurriedly over the mile or more of open field that separated the terminal buildings from the embarkation hoist, Mrs. Feltham stared intently forward across the receding row of shoulders in front of her. The ship stood up on the plain like an isolated silver spire. Near its bow she could see the intense blue light which proclaimed it all but ready to take off. Among and around the great tailfins dwarf vehicles and little dots of men moved in a fuss of final preparations. Mrs. Feltham glared at the scene, at this moment loathing it, and all the inventions of men, with a hard, hopeless hatred.

Presently she withdrew her gaze from the distance and focussed it on the back of her son-in-law's head, a yard in front of her. She hated him, too.

She turned, darting a swift glance at the face of her daughter in the seat beside her. Alice looked pale; her lips were firmly set; her eyes fixed straight ahead.

Mrs. Feltham hesitated. Her glance returned to the spaceship. She decided on one last effort. Under cover of the bus noise she said:

"Alice, darling, it's not too late, even now, you know."

The girl did not look at her. There was no sign that she had heard, save that her lips compressed a little more firmly. Then they parted.

"Mother, please!" she said.

But Mrs. Feltham, once started, had to go on.

"It's for your own sake, darling. All you have to do is to say you've changed your mind."

The girl held a protesting silence.

"Nobody would blame you," Mrs. Feltham persisted. "They'd not think a bit the worse of you. After all, everybody knows that Mars is no place for—"

"Mother, please stop it," interrupted the girl. The sharpness of her tone took Mrs. Feltham aback for a moment. She hesitated. But time was growing too short to allow herself the luxury of offended dignity. She went on:

"You're not used to the sort of life you'll have to live there, darling. Absolutely primitive. No kind of life for any woman. After all, dear, it is only a five years appointment for David. I'm sure if he really loves you he'd rather know that you *are* safe here and waiting—"

The girl said, harshly:

"We've been over all this before, Mother. I tell you it's no good. I'm not a child. I've thought it out, and I've made up my mind."

A Novelet by **JOHN WYNDHAM**

The odds were eight to one, eight men and a lone girl on the stranded spaceship—but which proved to be the stronger sex?

MRS. FELTHAM sat silent for some moments. The bus swayed on across the field, and the rocketship seemed to tower further into the sky.

"If you had a child of your own—" she said, half to herself. "—Well, I expect someday you will. Then you will begin to understand. . . ."

"I think it's you who don't understand," Alice said. "This is hard enough, anyway. You're only making it harder for me."

"My darling, I love you. I gave birth to you. I've watched over you always and I *know* you. I *know* this can't be the kind of life for you. If you were a hard, hoydenish kind of girl, well, perhaps—but you aren't darling. You know quite well you aren't."

"Perhaps you don't know me quite as well as you imagine you do, Mother."

Mrs. Feltham shook her head. She kept her eyes averted, boring jealously into the back of her son-in-law's head.

"He's taken you right away from me," she said dully.

"That's not true, Mother. It's—well, I'm no longer a child. I'm a woman with a life of my own to live."

" 'Whither thou goest, I will go. . .' " said Mrs. Feltham reflectively. "But that doesn't really hold now, you know. It was all right for a tribe of nomads, but nowadays the wives of soldiers, sailors, pilots, spacemen—"

"It's more than that, Mother. You don't understand. I must become adult and real to myself. . . ."

The bus rolled to a stop, puny and toylike beside the ship that seemed too large ever to lift. The passengers got out and stood staring upwards along the shining side. Mr. Feltham put his arms round his daughter. Alice clung to him, tears in her eyes. In an unsteady voice he murmured:

"Goodbye, my dear. And all the luck there is."

He released her, and shook hands with his son-in-law.

"Keep her safe, David. She's everything—"

"I know. I will. Don't you worry."

Mrs. Feltham kissed her daughter farewell, and forced herself to shake hands with her son-in-law.

A voice from the hoist called: "All passengers aboard, please!"

The doors of the hoist closed. Mr. Feltham avoided his wife's eyes. He put his arm round her waist, and led her back to the bus in silence.

AS THEY made their way, in company with a dozen other vehicles, back to the shelter of the terminal, Mrs. Feltham alternately dabbed her eyes with a wisp of white handkerchief and cast glances back at the spaceship standing tall, inert, and apparently deserted now. Her hand slid into her husband's.

"I can't believe it even now," she said. "It's so utterly unlike her. Would you ever have thought that our little Alice. . . .? Oh, why did she have to marry him. . . .?" Her voice trailed to a whimper.

Her husband pressed her fingers, without speaking.

"It wouldn't be so surprising with some girls," she went on. "But Alice was always so quiet. I used to worry because she was so quiet—I mean in case she might become one of those timid bores. Do you remember how the other children used to call her Mouse?

"And now this! Five years in that dreadful place! Oh, she'll never stand it, Henry. I know she won't, she's not the type. Why didn't you put your foot down, Henry? They'd have listened to you. You could have stopped it."

Her husband sighed. "There are times when one can give advice, Miriam, though it's scarcely ever popular, but what one must not do is try to live other people's lives for them. Alice is a woman now, with her own rights. Who am I to say what's best for her?"

"But you could have stopped her going."

"Perhaps—but I didn't care for the price."

She was silent for some seconds, then

her fingers tightened on his hand.

"Henry—Henry, I don't think we shall ever see them again. I feel it."

"Come, come, dear. They'll be back safe and sound, you'll see."

"You don't really believe that, Henry. You're just trying to cheer me up. Oh, why, why must she go to that horrible place? She's so young. She could have waited five years. Why is she so stubborn, so hard—not like my little Mouse, at all?"

Her husband patted her hand reassuringly.

"You must try to stop thinking of her as a child, Miriam. She's not; she's a woman now and if all our women were mice, it would be a poor outlook for our survival. . . ."

II

THE Navigating Officer of the s/r *Falcon* approached his Captain.

"The deviation, sir."

Captain Winters took the piece of paper held out to him.

"One point three six five degrees," he read out. "H'm. Not bad. Not at all bad, considering. South-east sector again. Why are nearly all deviations in the S.E. sector, I wonder, Mr. Carter?"

"Maybe they'll find out when we've been at the game a bit longer, sir. Right now it's just one of those things."

"Odd, all the same. Well, we'd better correct it before it gets any bigger."

The Captain loosened the expanding book-rack in front of him and pulled out a set of tables. He consulted them and scribbled down the result.

"Check, Mr. Carter."

The navigator compared the figures with the table, and approved.

"Good. How's she lying?" asked the Captain.

"Almost broadside, with a very slow roll, sir."

"You can handle it. I'll observe visually. Align her and stabilize. Ten seconds on starboard laterals at force two. She should take about thirty minutes, twenty seconds to swing over, but we'll watch that. Then neutralize with the port laterals at force two. Okay?"

"Very good, sir." The Navigating Officer sat down in the control chair, and fastened the belt. He looked over the keys and switches carefully.

"I'd better warn 'em. May be a bit of a jolt," said the Captain. He switched on the address system, and pulled the microphone bracket to him.

"Attention all! Attention all! We are about to correct course. There will be several impulses. None of them will be violent, but all fragile objects should be secured, and you are advised to seat yourselves and use the safety belts. The operation will take approximately half an hour and will start in five minutes from now. I shall inform you when it has been completed. That is all." He switched off.

"Some fool always thinks the ship's been holed by a meteor if you don't spoon it out," he added. "Have that woman in hysterics, mostly likely. Doesn't do any good." He pondered, idly. "I wonder what the devil she thinks she's doing out here, anyway. A quiet little thing like that; what she ought to be doing is sitting in some village back home, knitting."

"She knits here," observed the Navigating Officer.

"I know—and think what it implies! What's the idea of that kind going to Mars? She'll be as homesick as hell, and hate every foot of the place on sight. That husband of hers ought to have had more sense. Comes damn near cruelty to children."

"It mightn't be his fault, sir. I mean, some of those quiet ones can be amazingly stubborn."

The Captain eyed his officer speculatively.

"Well, I'm not a man of wide experience, but I know what I'd say to my wife if she thought of coming along."

"But you can't have a proper ding-dong with those quiet ones, sir. They kind of feather bed the whole thing, and

then get their own way in the end."

"I'll overlook the implication of the first part of that remark, Mr. Carter, but out of this extensive knowledge of women can you suggest to me why the devil she is here if he didn't drag her along? It isn't as if Mars were domestically hazardous, like a convention."

"Well, sir—she strikes me as the devoted type. Scared of her own shadow ordinarily, but with an awful amount of determination when the right string's pulled. It's sort of—well, you've heard of ewes facing lions in defense of their cubs, haven't you?"

"Assuming that you mean lambs," said the Captain, "the answers would be, A: I've always doubted it; and, B: she doesn't have any."

"I was just trying to indicate the type, sir."

The Captain scratched his cheek with his forefinger.

"You may be right, but I know if I were going to take a wife to Mars, which heaven forbid, I'd feel a tough, gun-toting Momma was less of a liability. What's his job there?"

"Taking charge of a mining company office, I think."

"Office hours, huh? Well, maybe it'll work out someway, but I still say the poor little thing ought to be in her own kitchen. She'll spend half the time scared to death, and the rest of it pining for home comforts." He glanced at the clock. "They've had enough time to batten down the chamber-pots now. Let's get busy."

HE FASTENED his own safety-belt, swung the screen in front of him on its pivot, switching it on as he did so, and leaned back watching the panorama of stars move slowly across it.

"All set, Mr. Carter?"

The Navigating Officer switched on a fuel line, and poised his right hand above a key.

"All set, sir."

"Okay. Straighten her up."

The Navigating Officer glued his attention to the pointers before him. He tapped the key beneath his fingers experimentally. Nothing happened. A slight double furrow appeared between his brows. He tapped again. Still there was no response.

"Get on with it, man," said the Captain irritably.

The Navigating Officer decided to try twisting her the other way. He tapped one of the keys under his left hand. This time there was response without delay. The whole ship jumped violently sideways and trembled. A crash jangled back and forth through the metal members around them like a diminishing echo.

Only the safety belt kept the Navigating Officer in his seat. He stared stupidly at the gyrating pointers before him. On the screen the stars were streaking across like a shower of fireworks. The Captain watched the display in ominous silence for a moment, then he said, coldly:

"Perhaps when you have had your fun, Mr. Carter, you will kindly straighten her up."

The navigator pulled himself together. He chose a key, and pressed it. Nothing happened. He tried another. Still the needles on the dials revolved smoothly. A slight sweat broke out on his forehead. He switched to another fuel line, and tried again.

The Captain lay back in his chair, watching the heavens stream across his screen.

"Well?" he demanded, curtly.

"There's—no response, sir."

Captain Winters unfastened his safety-belt and clacked across the floor on his magnetic soles. He jerked his head for the other to get out of his seat, and took his place. He checked the fuel line switches. He pressed a key. There was no impulse: the pointers continued to turn without a check. He tried other keys, fruitlessly. He looked up and met the navigator's eyes. After a long moment he moved back to his own desk, and flipped a switch. A voice broke into

the room:

"—would I know? All I know is that the old can's just bowling along head over elbow, and that ain't no kind of a way to run a bloody spaceship. If you ask me—"

"Jevons," snapped the Captain.

The voice broke off abruptly.

"Yes, sir?" it said, in a different tone.

"The laterals aren't firing."

"No, sir," the voice agreed.

"Wake up, man. I mean they *won't* fire. They're packed up."

"What—all of 'em, sir?"

"The only ones that have responded are the port laterals—and they shouldn't have kicked the way they did. Better send someone outside to look at 'em. I didn't like that kick."

"Very good, sir."

The Captain flipped the communicator switch back, and pulled over the announcement mike.

"Attention, please. You may release all safety-belts and proceed as normal. Correction of course has been postponed. You will be warned before it is resumed. That is all."

Captain and navigator looked at one another again. Their faces were grave, and their eyes troubled. . . .

CAPTAIN WINTERS studied his audience. It comprised everyone aboard the *Falcon*. Fourteen men and one woman. Six of the men were his crew; the rest passengers. He watched them as they found themselves places in the ship's small living-room. He would have been happier if his cargo had consisted of more freight and fewer passengers. Passengers, having nothing to occupy them, were always making mischief one way and another. Moreover, it was not a quiet, subservient type of man who recommended himself for a job as a miner, prospector, or general adventurer on Mars.

The woman could have caused a great deal of trouble aboard had she been so minded. Luckily she was diffident, self-effacing. But even though at times she was irritatingly without spirit, he thanked his luck that she had not turned out to be some incendiary blonde who would only add to his troubles.

All the same, he reminded himself, regarding her as she sat beside her husband, she could not be quite as meek as she looked. Carter must have been right when he spoke of a stiffening motive somewhere—without that she could never have started on the journey at all, and she would certainly not be coming through steadfast and uncomplaining so far. He glanced at the woman's husband. Queer creatures, women. Morgan was all right, but there was nothing about him, one would have said, to lead a woman on a trip like this. . . .

He waited until they had finished shuffling around and fitting themselves in. Silence fell. He let his gaze dwell on each face in turn. His own expression was serious.

III

"MRS. MORGAN and gentlemen," he began. "I have called you here together because it seemed best to me that each of you should have a clear understanding of our present position.

"It is this. Our lateral tubes have failed. They are, for reasons which we have not yet been able to ascertain, useless. In the case of the port laterals they are burnt out, and irreplaceable.

"In case some of you do not know what that implies, I should tell you that it is upon the laterals that the navigation of the ship depends. The main drive tubes give us the initial impetus for take-off. After that they are shut off, leaving us in free fall. Any deviations from the course plotted are corrected by suitable bursts from the laterals.

"But it is not only for steering that we use them. In landing, which is an infinitely more complex job than take-off, they are essential. We brake by reversing the ship and using the main drive to check our speed. But I think you can scarcely fail to realize that it is an oper-

ation of the greatest delicacy to keep the huge mass of such a ship as this perfectly balanced upon the thrust of her drive as she descends. It is the laterals which make such balance possible. Without them it cannot be done."

A dead silence held the room for some seconds. Then a voice asked, drawling:

"What you're saying, Captain, is, the way things are, we can neither steer nor land—is that it?"

Captain Winters looked at the speaker. He was a big man. Without exerting himself, and, apparently, without intention, he seemed to possess a natural domination over the rest.

"That is exactly what I mean," he replied.

A tenseness came over the room. There was the sound of a quickly drawn breath here and there.

The man with the slow voice nodded, fatalistically. Someone else asked:

"Does that mean that we might crash on Mars?"

"No," said the Captain. "If we go on traveling as we are now, slightly off course, we shall miss Mars altogether."

"And so go on out to play tag with the asteroids," another voice suggested.

"That is what would happen if we did nothing about it. But there is a way we can stop that, if we can manage it." The Captain paused, aware that he had their absorbed attention. He continued:

"You must all be well aware from the peculiar behavior of space as seen from our ports that we are now tumbling along all as—er—head over heels. This is due to the explosion of the port laterals. It is a highly unorthodox method of travelling, but it does mean that by an impulse from our main tubes given at exactly the critical moment we should be able to alter our course approximately as we require."

"And how much good is that going to do us if we can't land?" somebody wanted to know. The Captain ignored the interruption. He continued:

"I have been in touch by radio with both home and Mars, and have reported our state. I have also informed them that I intend to attempt the one possible course open to me. That is of using the main drive in an attempt to throw the ship into an orbit about Mars.

"If that is successful we shall avoid two dangers—that of shooting on towards the outer parts of the system, and of crashing on Mars. I think we have a good chance of bringing it off."

WHEN HE stopped speaking he saw alarm in several faces, thoughtful concentration in others. He noticed Mrs. Morgan holding tightly to her husband's hand, her face a little paler than usual. It was the man with the drawl who broke the silence.

"You *think* there is a good chance?" he repeated questioningly.

"I do. I also think it is the only chance. But I'm not going to try to fool you by pretending complete confidence. It's too serious for that."

"And if we do get into this orbit?"

"They will try to keep a radar fix on us, and send help as soon as possible."

"H'm," said the questioner. "And what do you personally think about that, Captain?"

"I—well, it isn't going to be easy. But we're all in this together, so I'll tell you just what they told me. At the very best we can't expect them to reach us for some months. The ship will have to come from Earth. The two planets are well past conjunction now. I'm afraid it's going to mean quite a wait."

"Can we—hold out long enough, Captain?"

"According to my calculations we should be able to hold out for about seventeen or eighteen weeks."

"And that will be long enough?"

"It'll have to be."

He broke the thoughtful pause that followed by continuing in a brisker manner.

"This is not going to be comfortable, or pleasant. But, if we all play our parts, and keep strictly to the necessary measures, it can be done. Now, there are

three essentials: air to breathe—well, luckily we shan't have to worry about that. The regeneration plant and stock of spare cylinders, and cylinders in cargo will look after that for a long time. Water will be rationed. Two pints each every twenty-four hours, for *everything*. Luckily we shall be able to draw water from the fuel tanks, or it would be a great deal less than that. The thing that is going to be our most serious worry is food."

He explained his proposals further, with patient clarity. At the end he added: "And now I expect you have some questions?"

A small, wiry man with a weather-beaten face asked:

"Is there no hope at all of getting the lateral tubes to work again?"

Captain Winters shook his head.

"Negligible. The impellent section of a ship is not constructed to be accessible in space. We shall keep on trying, of course, but even if the others could be made to fire, we should still be unable to repair the port laterals."

He did his best to answer the few more questions that followed in ways that held a balance between easy confidence and despondency. The prospect was by no means good. Before help could possibly reach them they were all going to need all the nerve and resolution they had—and out of sixteen persons some must be weaker than others.

His gaze rested again on Alice Morgan and her husband beside her. Her presence was certainly a possible source of trouble. When it came to the pinch the man would have more strain on account of her—and, most likely, fewer scruples.

Since the woman was here, she must share the consequences equally with the rest. There could be no privilege. In a sharp emergency one could afford a heroic gesture, but preferential treatment of any one person in the long ordeal which they must face would create an impossible situation. Make any allowances for her, and you would be called on to make allowances for others on health or other grounds—with heaven knew what complications to follow.

A fair chance with the rest was the best he could do for her—not, he felt, looking at her as she clutched her husband's hand and looked at him from wide eyes in a pale face, not a very good best.

He hoped she would not be the first to go under. It would be better for morale if she were not the very first. . . .

SHE WAS NOT the first to go. For nearly three months nobody went.

The *Falcon*, by means of skilfully timed bursts on the main tubes, had succeeded in nudging herself into an orbital relationship with Mars. After that, there was little that the crew could do for her. At the distance of equilibrium she had become a very minor satellite, rolling and tumbling on her circular course, destined, so far as anyone could see, to continue this untidy progress until help reached them or perhaps forever. . . .

Inboard, the complexity of her twisting somersaults was not perceptible unless one deliberately uncovered a port. If one did, the crazy cavortings of the universe outside produced such a sense of bewilderment that one gladly shut the cover again to preserve the illusion of stability within. Even Captain Winters and the Navigating Officer took their observations as swiftly as possible and were relieved when they had shut the whizzing constellations off the screen, and could take refuge in relativity.

For all her occupants the *Falcon* had become a small, independent world, very sharply finite in space, and scarcely less so in time.

It was, moveover, a world with a very low standard of living; a community with short tempers, weakening distempers, aching bellies, and ragged nerves. It was a group in which each man watched on a trigger of suspicion for a hairsbreadth difference in the next man's ration, and where the little he ate so avidly was not enough to quiet the

rumblings of his stomach. He was ravenous when he went to sleep; more ravenous when he woke from dreams of food.

Men who had started from Earth full-bodied were now gaunt and lean, their faces had hardened from curved contours into angled planes and changed their healthy colors for a gray pallor in which their eyes glittered unnaturally. They had all grown weaker. The weakest lay on their couches torpidly. The more fortunate looked at them from time to time with a question in their eyes. It was not difficult to read the question: 'Why do we go on wasting good food on this guy? Looks like he's booked, anyway.' But as yet no one had taken up that booking.

The situation was worse than Captain Winters had foreseen. There had been bad stowage. The cans in several cases of meat had collapsed under the terrific pressure of other cans above them during take-off. The resulting mess was now describing an orbit of its own around the ship. He had had to throw it out secretly. If the men had known of it, they would have eaten it gladly, maggots and all. Another case shown on his inventory had disappeared. He still did not know how. The ship had been searched for it without trace. Much of the emergency stores consisted of dehydrated foods for which he dared not spare sufficient water, so that though edible they were painfully unattractive. They had been intended simply as a supplement in case the estimated time was overrun, and were not extensive. Little in the cargo was edible, and that mostly small cans of luxuries. As a result, he had had to reduce the rations expected to stretch meagerly over seventeen weeks. And even so, they would not last that long.

The first who did go owed it neither to sickness nor malnutrition, but to accident.

IV

JEVONS, the chief engineer, maintained that the only way to locate and correct the trouble with the laterals was to effect an entry into the propellent section of the ship. Owing to the tanks which backed up against the bulkhead separating the sections this could not be achieved from within the ship herself.

It had proved impossible with the tools available to cut a slice out of the hull; the temperature of space and the conductivity of the hull caused all their heat to run away and dissipate itself without making the least impression on the tough skin. The one way he could see of getting in was to cut away round the burnt-out tubes of the port laterals. It was debatable whether this was worth while since the other laterals would still be unbalanced on the port side, but where he found opposition solidly against him was in the matter of using precious oxygen to operate his cutters. He had to accept that ban, but he refused to relinquish his plan altogether.

"Very well," he said, grimly. "We're like rats in a trap, but Bowman and I aim to do more than just keep the trap going, and we're going to try, even if we have to cut our way into the damned ship by hand."

Captain Winters had okayed that; not that he believed that anything useful would come of it, but it would keep Jevons quiet, and do no one else any harm. So for weeks Jevons and Bowman had got into their spacesuits and worked their shifts. Oblivious after a time of the wheeling heavens about them, they kept doggedly on with their sawing and filing. Their progress, pitifully slow at best, had grown even slower as they became weaker.

Just what Bowman was attempting when he met his end still remained a mystery. He had not confided in Jevons. All that anyone knew about it was the sudden lurch of the ship and the clang of reverberations running up and down the hull. Possibly it was an accident. More likely he had become impatient and laid a small charge to blast an opening.

For the first time for weeks ports were uncovered and faces looked out giddily

at the wheeling stars. Bowman came into sight. He was drifting inertly, a dozen yards or more outboard. His suit was deflated, and a large gash showed in the material of the left sleeve.

The consciousness of a corpse floating round and round you like a minor moon is no improver of already lowered morale. Push it away, and it still circles, though at a greater distance. Someday a proper ceremony for the situation would be invented—perhaps a small rocket would launch the poor remains upon their last, infinite voyage. Meanwhile, lacking a precedent, Captain Winters decided to pay the body the decent respect of having it brought inboard. The refrigeration plant had to be kept going to preserve the small remaining stocks of food, but several sections of it were empty. . . .

A day and a night by the clock had passed since the provisional interment of Bowman when a modest knock came on the control room door. The Captain laid blotting-paper carefully over his latest entry in the log; and closed the book.

"Come in," he said.

The door opened just widely enough to admit Alice Morgan. She slipped in, and shut it behind her. He was somewhat surprised to see her. She had kept sedulously in the background, putting the few requests she had made through the intermediary of her husband. He noticed the changes in her. She was haggard now as they all were, and her eyes anxious. She was also nervous. The fingers of her thin hands sought one another and interlocked themselves for confidence. Clearly she was having to push herself to raise whatever was in her mind. He smiled in order to encourage her.

"Come and sit down, Mrs. Morgan," he invited, amiably.

She crossed the room with a slight clicking from her magnetic soles, and took the chair he indicated. She seated herself uneasily, and on the forward edge.

It had been sheer cruelty to bring her on this voyage, he reflected again. She had been at least a pretty little thing, now she was no longer that. Why couldn't that fool husband of hers have left her in her proper setting—a nice quiet suburb, a gentle routine, a life where she would be protected from exaction and alarm alike. It surprised him again that she had had the resolution and the stamina to survive conditions on the *Falcon* as long as this. Fate would probably have been kinder to her if it had disallowed that. He spoke to her quietly, for she perched rather than sat, making him think of a bird ready to take off at any sudden movement.

"And what can I do for you, Mrs. Morgan?"

ALICE'S fingers twined and intertwined. She watched them doing it. She looked up, opened her mouth to speak, closed it again.

"It isn't very easy," she murmured apologetically.

Trying to help her, he said:

"No need to be nervous, Mrs. Morgan. Just tell me what's on your mind. Has one of them been—bothering you?"

She shook her head.

"Oh, no, Captain Winters. It's nothing like that at all."

"What is it, then?"

"It's—it's the rations, Captain. I'm not getting enough food."

The kindly concern froze out of his face.

"None of us is," he told her, shortly.

"I know," she said, hurriedly. "I know, but—"

"But what?" he inquired in a chill tone.

She drew a breath.

"There's the man who died yesterday. Bowman. I thought if I could have his rations—"

The sentence trailed away as she saw the expression on the Captain's face.

He was not acting. He was feeling just as shocked as he looked. Of all the impudent suggestions that ever had

come his way, none had astounded him more. He gazed dumbfounded at the source of the outrageous proposition. Her eyes met his, but, oddly, with less timidity than before. There was no sign of shame in them.

"I've *got* to have more food," she said, intensely.

Captain Winters' anger mounted.

"So you thought you'd just snatch a dead man's share as well as your own! I'd better not tell you in words just where I class that suggestion, young woman. But you can understand this: we share, and we share equally. What Bowman's death means to us is that we can keep on having the same ration for a little longer—that, and only that. And now I think you had better go."

But Alice Morgan made no move to go. She sat there with her lips pressed together, her eyes a little narrowed, quite still save that her hands trembled. Even through his indignation the Captain felt surprise, as though he had watched a hearth cat suddenly become a hunter. She said stubbornly:

"I haven't asked for any privilege until now, Captain. I wouldn't ask you now if it weren't absolutely necessary. But that man's death gives us a margin now. And I *must* have more food."

The Captain controlled himself with an effort.

"Bowman's death has *not* given us a margin, or a windfall—all it has done is to extend by a day or two the chance of our survival. Do you think that every one of us doesn't ache just as much as you do for more food? In all my considerable experience of effrontery—"

She raised her thin hand to stop him. The hardness of her eyes made him wonder why he had ever thought her timid.

"Captain. Look at me!" she said, in a harsh tone.

He looked. Presently his expression of anger faded into shocked astonishment. A faint tinge of pink stole into her pale cheeks.

"Yes," she said. "You see, you've *got* to give me more food. My baby *must* have the chance to live."

The Captain continued to stare at her as if mesmerized. Presently he shut his eyes, and passed his hand over his brow.

"God in heaven. This is terrible," he murmured.

Alice Morgan said seriously, as if she had already considered that very point:

"No. It isn't terrible—not if my baby lives." He looked at her helplessly, without speaking. She went on:

"It wouldn't be robbing anyone, you see. Bowman doesn't need his rations any more—but my baby does. It's quite simple, really." She looked questioningly at the Captain. He had no comment ready. She continued: "So you couldn't call it unfair. After all, I'm two people now, really, aren't I? I *need* more food. If you don't let me have it you will be murdering my baby. So you *must* . . . *must*. . . My baby has *got* to live—he's *got* to. . . ."

V

WHEN she had gone Captain Winters mopped his forehead, unlocked his private drawer, and took out one of his carefully hoarded bottles of whiskey. He had the self-restraint to take only a small pull on the drinking-tube and then put it back. It revived him a little, but his eyes were still shocked and worried.

Would it not have been kinder in the end to tell the woman that her baby had no chance at all of being born? That would have been honest; but he doubted whether the coiner of the phrase about honesty being the best policy had known a great deal about group-morale. Had he told her that, it would have been impossible to avoid telling her why, and once she knew why it would have been impossible for her not to confide it, if only to her husband. And then it would be too late.

The Captain opened the top drawer, and regarded the pistol within. There was always that. He was tempted to take hold of it now and use it. There wasn't

much use in playing the silly game out. Sooner or later it would have to come to that, anyway.

He frowned at it, hesitating. Then he put out his right hand and gave the thing a flip with his finger, sending it floating to the back of the drawer, out of sight. He closed the drawer. Not yet. . . .

But perhaps he had better begin to carry it soon. So far, his authority had held. There had been nothing worse than safety-valve grumbling. But a time would come when he was going to need the pistol either for them or for himself.

If they should begin to suspect that the encouraging bulletins that he pinned up on the board from time to time were fakes: if they should somehow find out that the rescue ship which they believed to be hurtling through space towards them had not, in fact, even yet been able to take off from Earth—that was when hell would start breaking loose.

It might be safer if there were to be an accident with the radio equipment before long. . . .

"TAKEN your time, haven't you?" Captain Winters asked. He spoke shortly because he was irritable, not because it mattered in the least how long anyone took over anything now.

The Navigating Officer made no reply. His boots clicked across the floor. A key and an identity bracelet drifted towards the Captain, an inch or so above the surface of his desk. He put out a hand to check them.

"I—" he began. Then he caught sight of the other's face. "Good God, man, what's the matter with you?"

He felt some compunction. He wanted Bowman's identity bracelet for the record, but there had been no real need to send Carter for it. A man who had died Bowman's death would be a piteous sight. That was why they had left him still in his spacesuit instead of undressing him. All the same, he had thought that Carter was tougher stuff. He brought out a bottle. The last bottle.

"Better have a shot of this," he said.

The navigator did, and put his head in his hands. The Captain carefully rescued the bottle from its midair drift, and put it away. Presently the Navigating Officer said, without looking up:

"I'm sorry, sir."

"That's okay, Carter. Nasty job. Should have done it myself."

The other shuddered slightly. A minute passed in silence while he got a grip on himself. Then he looked up and met the Captain's eyes.

"It—it wasn't just that, sir."

The Captain looked puzzled.

"How do you mean?" he asked.

The Officer's lips trembled. He did not form his words properly, and he stammered.

"Pull yourself together. What are you trying to say?" The Captain spoke sharply to stiffen him.

Carter jerked his head slightly. His lips stopped trembling.

"He—he—" he floundered; then he tried again, in a rush. "He—hasn't any legs, sir."

"Who? What *is* this? You mean Bowman hasn't any legs?"

"Y-yes, sir."

"Nonsense, man. I was there when he was brought in. So were you. He had legs, all right."

"Yes, sir. He did have legs then—but he hasn't now!"

The Captain sat very still. For some seconds there was no sound in the control-room but the clicking of the chronometer. Then he spoke with difficulty, getting no further than two words:

"You mean—?"

"What else could it be, sir?"

"God in heaven!" gasped the Captain.

He sat staring with eyes that had taken on the horror that lay in the other man's. . . .

TWO MEN moved silently, with socks over their magnetic soles. They stopped opposite the door of one of the refrigeration compartments. One of them produced a slender key. He slipped it into the lock, felt delicately with it

among the wards for a moment, and then turned it with a click. As the door swung open a pistol fired twice from within the refrigerator. The man who was pulling the door sagged at the knees, and hung in mid-air.

The other man still was behind the half-opened door. He snatched a pistol from his pocket and slid it swiftly round the corner of the door, pointing into the refrigerator. He pulled the trigger twice.

A figure in a spacesuit launched itself out of the refrigerator, sailing uncannily across the room. The other man shot at it as it swept past him. The spacesuited figure collided with the opposite wall, recoiled slightly, and hung there. Before it could turn and use the pistol in its hand, the other man fired again. The figure jerked, and floated back against the wall. The man kept his pistol trained, but the spacesuit swayed there, flaccid and inert.

The door by which the men had entered opened with a sudden clang. The Navigating Officer on the threshold did not hesitate. He fired slightly after the other, but he kept on firing....

When his pistol was empty the man in front of him swayed queerly, anchored by his boots; there was no other movement in him.

The Navigating Officer put out a hand and steadied himself by the doorframe. Then, slowly and painfully, he made his way across to the figure in the spacesuit. There were gashes in the suit. He managed to unlock the helmet and pull it away.

The Captain's face looked somewhat grayer than undernourishment had made it. His eyes opened slowly. He said in a whisper:

"Your job now, Carter. Good luck!"

The Navigating Officer tried to answer, but there were no words, only a bubbling of blood in his throat. His hands relaxed. There was a dark stain still spreading on his uniform. Presently his body hung listlessly swaying beside his Captain's.

I FIGURED they were going to last a lot longer than this," said the small man with the sandy mustache.

The man with the drawl looked at him steadily.

"Oh, you did, did you? And do you reckon your figuring's reliable?"

The smaller man shifted awkwardly. He ran the tip of his tongue along his lips.

"Well, there was Bowman. Then those four. Then the two that died. That's seven."

"Sure. That's seven. Well?" inquired the big man softly. He was not as big as he had been, but he still had a large frame. Under his intent regard the emaciated small man seemed to shrivel a little more.

"Er—nothing. Maybe my figuring was kind of hopeful," he said.

"Maybe. My advice to you is to quit figuring and keep on hoping. Huh?"

The small man wilted. "Er—yes. I guess so."

The big man looked round the living-room, counting heads.

"Okay. Let's start," he said.

A silence fell on the rest. They gazed at him with uneasy fascination. They fidgeted. One or two nibbled at their finger nails. The big man leaned forward. He put a space-helmet, inverted, on the table. In his customary leisurely fashion he said:

"We shall draw for it. Each of us will take a paper and hold it up unopened until I give the word. *Un*opened. Got that?"

They nodded. Every eye was fixed intently upon his face.

"Good. Now one of those pieces of paper in the helmet is marked with a cross. Ray, I want you to count the pieces there and make sure that there are nine—"

"Eight!" said Alice Morgan's voice, sharply.

All the heads turned towards her as if pulled by strings. The faces looked startled, as though the owners might have heard a turtle-dove roar. Alice sat

embarrassed under the combined gaze, but she held herself steady and her mouth was set in a straight line. The man in charge of the proceedings studied her.

"Well, well," he drawled. "So you don't want to take a hand in our little game!"

"No," said Alice.

"You've shared equally with us so far —but now we have reached this regrettable stage you don't want to?"

"No," agreed Alice again.

He raised his eyebrows.

"You are appealing to our chivalry, perhaps?"

"No," said Alice once more. "I'm denying the equity of what you call your game. The one who draws the cross dies —isn't that the plan?"

"Pro bono publico," said the big man. "Deplorable, of course, but unfortunately necessary."

"But if *I* draw it, two must die. Do you call that equitable?" Alice asked.

The group looked taken aback. Alice waited.

The big man fumbled it. For once he was at a loss.

"Well," said Alice, "isn't that so?"

One of the others broke the silence to observe: "The question of the exact stage when the personality, the soul of the individual, takes form is still highly debatable. Some have held that until there is separate existence—"

THE DRAWLING voice of the big man cut him short. "I think we can leave that point to the theologians, Sam. This is more in the Wisdom of Solomon class. The point would seem to be that Mrs. Morgan claims exemption on account of her condition."

"My baby has a right to live," Alice said doggedly.

"We all have a right to live. We all want to live," someone put in.

"Why should you—?" another began; but the drawling voice dominated again:

"Very well, gentlemen. Let us be formal. Let us be democratic. We will vote on it. The question is put: do you consider Mrs. Morgan's claim to be valid—or should she take her chance with the rest of us? Those in—"

"Just a minute," said Alice, in a firmer voice than any of them had heard her use. "Before you start voting on that you'd better listen to me a bit." She looked round, making sure she had the attention of all of them. She had; and their astonishment as well.

"Now the first thing is that I am a lot more important than any of you," she told them simply. "No, you needn't smile. I am—and I'll tell you why.

"Before the radio broke down—"

"Before the Captain wrecked it, you mean," someone corrected her.

"Well, before it became useless," she compromised, "Captain Winters was in regular touch with home. He gave them news of us. The news that the Press wanted most was about me. Women, particularly women in unusual situations, are always news. He told me I was in the headlines: GIRL-WIFE IN DOOM ROCKET, WOMAN'S SPACE-WRECK ORDEAL, that sort of thing. And if you haven't forgotten how newspapers look, you can imagine the leads, too: 'Trapped in their living space-tomb, a girl and fifteen men now wheel helplessly around the planet mars . . .'

"All of you are just men—hulks, like the ship. I am a woman, therefore my position is romantic, so I am young, glamorous, beautiful . . ." Her thin face showed for a moment the trace of a wry smile. "I am a heroine . . ."

She paused, letting the idea sink in. Then she went on:

"I was a heroine even before Captain Winters told them that I was pregnant. But after that I became a phenomenon. There were demands for interviews. I wrote one, and Captain Winters transmitted it for me. There have been interviews with my parents and my friends, anyone who knew me. And now an enormous number of people know a great deal about me. They are intensely interested in me. They are even more

interested in my baby—which is likely to be the first baby ever born in a spaceship. . .

"Now do you begin to see? You have a fine tale ready. Bowman, my husband, Captain Winters and the rest were heroically struggling to repair the port laterals. There was an explosion. It blew them all away out into space.

"You may get away with that. But if there is no trace of me and my baby—or of our bodies—*then* what are you going to say? How will you explain that?"

She looked round the faces again.

"Well, what *are* you going to say? That I, too, was outside repairing the port laterals? That I committed suicide by shooting myself out into space with a rocket?

"Just think it over. The whole world's press is wanting to know about me—with all the details. It'll have to be a mighty good story to stand up to that. And if it doesn't stand up—well, the rescue won't have done you much good.

"You'll not have a chance in hell. You'll hang, or you'll fry, every one of you—unless it happens they lynch you first. . . ."

There was silence in the room as she finished speaking. Most of the faces showed the astonishment of men ferociously attacked by a pekinese, and at a loss for suitable comment.

The big man sat sunk in reflection for a minute or more. Then he looked up, rubbing the stubble on his sharp-boned chin thoughtfully. He glanced round the others and then let his eyes rest on Alice. For a moment there was a twitch at the corner of his mouth.

"Madam," he drawled, "you are probably a great loss to the legal profession." He turned away. "We shall have to reconsider this matter before our next meeting. But, for the present, Ray, *eight* pieces of paper as the lady said. . . ."

VI

"IT'S HER!" said the Second, over the Skipper's shoulder.

The Skipper moved irritably. "Of course it's her. What else'd you expect to find whirling through space like a sozzled owl?" He studied the screen for a moment. "Not a sign. Every port covered."

"Do you think there's a chance, Skipper?"

"What, after all this time! No, Tommy, not a ghost of it. We're—just the morticians, I guess."

"How'll we get aboard her, Skip?"

The Skipper watched the gyrations of the *Falcon* with a calculating eye.

"Well, there aren't any rules, but I reckon if we can get a cable on her we *might* be able to play her gently, like a big fish. It'll be tricky, though."

Tricky it was. Five times the magnet projected from the rescue ship failed to make contact. The sixth attempt was better judged. When the magnet drifted close to the *Falcon* the current was switched on for a moment. It changed course, and floated nearer to the ship. When it was almost in contact the switch went over again. It darted forward, and glued itself limpet-like to the hull.

Then followed the long game of playing the *Falcon;* of keeping tension on the cable between the two ships, but not too much tension, and of holding the rescue ship from being herself thrown into a roll by the pull. Three times the cable parted, but at last, after weary hours of adroit maneuver by the rescue ship the derelict's motion had been reduced to a slow twist. There was still no trace of life aboard. The rescue ship closed a little.

The Captain, the Third Officer and the doctor fastened on their spacesuits and went outboard. They made their way forward to the winch. The Captain looped a short length of line over the cable, and fastened both ends of it to his belt. He laid hold of the cable with both hands, and with a heave sent himself skimming into space. The others followed him along the guiding cable.

They gathered beside the *Falcon's* en-

trance port. The Third Officer took a crank from his satchel. He inserted it in an opening, and began to turn until he was satisfied that the inner door of the airlock was closed. When it would turn no more, he withdrew it, and fitted it into the next opening: that should set the motors pumping air out of the lock —if there were air, and if there were still current to work the motors. The Captain held a microphone against the hull, and listened. He caught a humming.

"Okay. They're running," he said.

He waited until the humming stopped.

"Right. Open her up," he directed.

The Third Officer inserted his crank again, and wound it. The main port opened inwards, leaving a dark gap in the shining hull. The three looked at the opening somberly for some seconds. With a grim quietness the Captain's voice said: "Well. Here we go!"

THEY moved carefully and slowly into the blackness, listening.

The Third Officer's voice murmured:

"The silence that is in the starry sky,
The sleep that is among the lonely hills . . ."

Presently the Captain's voice asked: "How's the air, Doc?"

The doctor looked at his gauges.

"It's okay," he said, in some surprise. "Pressure's about six ounces down, that's all." He began to unfasten his helmet. The others copied him. The Captain made a face as he took his off.

"The place stinks," he said, uneasily. "Let's—get on with it."

He led the way towards the lounge. They entered it apprehensively.

The scene was uncanny and bewildering. Though the gyrations of the *Falcon* had been reduced, every loose object in her continued to circle until it met a solid obstruction and bounced off it upon a new course. The result was a medley of wayward items churning slowly hither and thither.

"Nobody here, anyway," said the Captain, practically. "Doc, do you think—?"

He broke off at the sight of the doctor's strange expression. He followed the line of the other's gaze. The doctor was looking at the drifting flotsam of the place. Among the flow of books, cans, playing-cards, boots and miscellaneous rubbish, his attention was riveted upon a bone. It was large and clean and had been cracked open.

The Captain nudged him. "What's the matter, Doc?"

The doctor turned unseeing eyes upon him for a moment, and then looked back at the drifting bone.

"That—" he said in an unsteady voice —"that, Skipper, is a human femur."

In the long moment that followed while they stared at the grisly relic the silence which had lain over the *Falcon* was broken. The sound of a voice rose, thin, uncertain, but perfectly clear. The three looked incredulously at one another as they listened:

"Rock-a-bye baby
On the tree top.
When the wind blows
The cradle will rock . . ."

Alice sat on the side of her bunk, swaying a little, and holding her baby to her. It smiled, and reached up one miniature hand to pat her cheek as she sang:

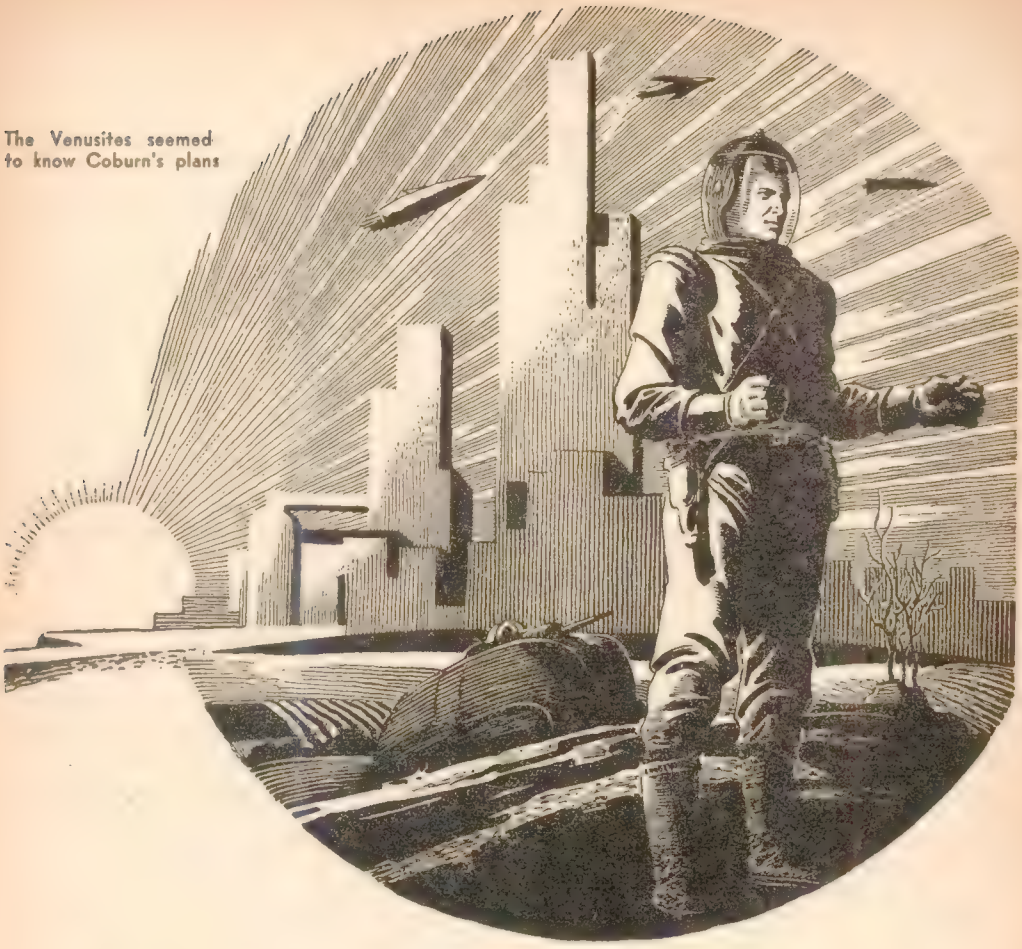
". . . When the bough breaks
The cradle will fall.
Down will—"

Her song cut off suddenly at the click of the opening door. For a moment she stared as blankly at the three figures in the opening as they at her. Her face was a mask with harsh lines drawn from the points where the skin was stretched tightly over prominent bones. Then a trace of expression came over it. Her eyes brightened. Her lips curved in a travesty of a smile.

She loosed her arms from about the baby, and it hung there in mid-air, chuckling a little to itself. She slid her right hand under the pillow of the bunk and drew it out again, holding a pistol.

The black shape of the pistol looked enormous in her transparently thin hand as she pointed it at the men who stood transfixed in the doorway.

"Look, baby," she said. "Look there. Food. Lovely food . . ."



The Venusites seemed to know Coburn's plans

Alien Psychologist

DANE COBURN knew in the instant of awakening what had happened to him. Horror held his body in nerve-quivering rigidity—and thus prolonged his life.

He felt the small circular patches of numbness on his body and legs—eleven of them. His olfactory nerves writhed at the alien distinctively evil stench of the *sbedico*. He felt the *sbedico's* weight, four or five grams of deadliness, the unhurried motions of its ten pointed legs on his thigh. He even heard the dry, rustling movements of its armored joints.

And he knew that at the slightest movement its killer-fang would flash, that after three minutes of agonized convulsions he would die.

But already he was worse than dead.

The Ways of Death on Island 19 Can be Strange

a story of Venus by ERIK FENNEL

It was only because he expected it that he felt numbness spread through a twelfth area above his left knee. There was no pain as the *sbedico's* ovipositor jabbed deep into his flesh to release another cluster of eggs, for the anesthetic needled under his skin by the hair-thin hollow spear was extremely effective.

This stealth was one reason why the *sbedico* was the most feared and hated creature on all Venus. An unwary victim could become a living incubator for the creature's foul maggots without realizing what had happened.

Dane Coburn knew, but still in a dazed, shocked way that carried no sense of reality, that a *sbedico* had got into his sealed, insect-proof house. It was impossible. Here on Island Nineteen there were no *sbedicos*.

and Terrible—but Its Ways of Life Are Stranger!

Down on the marsh-drowned swamp-islands nearer the equator, yes. Even on the mainland, near the Cylinder where a force-field held open a single window to clear sky through which the space-ships landed, yes. But Island Nineteen was isolated by league after league of mist-pressed ocean.

Yet a *sbedico* had reached Island Nineteen—and had invaded his insect-proof house—and had killed him.

The *sbedico* was satisfied with the twelve clutches of eggs deposited in this mass of warm rich living flesh. Slowly it crawled down Dane's leg, off his foot, then out to crouch, quiescent but still deadly on top of the blanket. It was impossible. But it *was* and Dane fought down gibbering abject terror.

Gradually, his emotions still numbed, he understood his choice. He could die quickly—or slowly. And the first was better.

He would reach down, grab before the lightning-quick *sbedico* could jump, take its bite but crush the nightmare between his fingers before its poison stopped his heart.

Now. *Now!* Not a muscle moved.

Dane Coburn had waited too long. The anaesthetic from the *sbedico's* ovipositor had diffused through his nervous system. For the next two hours he would be paralyzed.

THE inner door of the vestibule flung open. The overhead light tubes flared into full brilliance.

Dane's head refused to move. He could not even blink. But he did manage to roll his eyeballs.

The man in the doorway was swamp-suited and hooded and alert. One hand held a pest-gun while the other grasped a Bristol. He raised the pest-gun, took careful aim as he stepped forward.

Dane wanted to sob then, openly and unashamed. Rescue had come—too late. But tears would not form in his eyes and his respiration remained slow and steady. Only his brain wept.

The *sbedico* leaped at the newcomer.

The pest-gun spat sibilantly. Its gas-driven cone of spray caught the creature in mid-leap, drove it backwards and to the floor.

The stranger narrowed the cone, fired again before the *sbedico* could recover.

The quick-hardening plastic component of the spray, effective even when the poison was useless, grew sticky. It held the monster's second leap to a few short inches.

The stranger closed in, still wary. The shell of the *sbedico* made a brittle sound and its soft inner parts squished as he brought a woven metal boot down hard. He kept stamping until nothing remained but a greasy purple splotch.

He turned away at last, closed the vestibule door, loosened his hood.

Only paralysis kept Dane from gasping. *The man was Barton Eveleth.* Eveleth should be under guard back in Toehold City, awaiting disposition for the murder of Venusian humanoids!

"It's me," he said. "And I'm glad my little pet didn't give you the quick finish." He chuckled and Dane could not even wince.

"Those eggs will hatch in a couple of hours, about the time the anaesthesia wears off. You have no idea—yet—how much it will hurt. You may, if you have a strong will, be able to keep your hands away from those places for awhile. But finally you'll scratch or rub.

"You know what will happen then?"

Dane knew. Every Earthman who came out to Venus heard tales of the devilish *sbedicos.* But Eveleth gained a sadistic satisfaction from putting it into words.

"You'll disturb the maggots. One will retract the biting mandible it's been using on your living flesh and push out its poison stinger. You'll writhe and you'll scream but not long.

"After you're dead the maggots will keep on gnawing and growing. At last they'll have enough, bite out through your skin and become adult *sbedicos.*"

He scanned Dane's face, scowling in

disappointment when no signs of panic or pleadings for mercy were visible. He could not see Dane's thoughts.

"I'd make it even worse for you if I knew how, you dirty stoolie!"

He twisted Dane's head on the pillow. "Here. You'll want to see this."

He opened the cabinet of the microwave transceiver and unplugged the power tube. He held it shoulder high, then deliberately opened his fingers and let the delicate mechanism shatter on the floor. "There, stoolie. You won't make trouble for me again."

A thought burned through Dane's mind. Eveleth had forgotten. There was another power tube in the standard spare parts kit. If only—

"Pretty soon I'm going out and finish what I started before. I'm going around this island, grab everything I want, and show those damned skinny jungle-running Venusites who's boss. If they won't trade when we're nice to them, okay, we'll get tough.

"When I show up back in the City with a couple of hundred pounds of platinum and a sackful of Venus crystals they'll call me a hero instead of a murderer. There's lots of fellows sick of this pussy-footing policy already. This going easy with those dumb savages is all hogwash. They don't even have weapons.

"And when the *sbedicos* in your body hatch and start spreading they'll fix any Venusites I miss. It ought to go fast because there ain't been no *sbedicos* on this island and the Venusites won't be looking out for 'em. That's why I trapped one and brought it along."

DANE had only one weapon in his outpost station, a small hand-Bristol. Going as nearly weaponless as possible had been part of his mission. Eveleth found it, removed the cover and with a screwdriver broke the brittle little igniter coil.

"So you won't get ideas about following me," he explained, "And so if you want to bump yourself off you'll have to do it some harder way."

Dane stared, hating Eveleth with bitter vehemence but unable to move.

"So long, stoolie."

He turned toward the door. Then he came back again, smirking, and walked directly to the spare parts kit.

"Thought I'd forgotten, eh?" he chuckled. "No. Just wanted to let you get your hopes up a bit. But it wouldn't have helped. All the doctors on Earth and Venus couldn't get those maggots out and still keep you alive.

"But here. Catch it if you want it!"

He threw the spare power tube. Dane watched it pass within easy reach of one who was not paralyzed and shatter against the wall. Shards of glass fell on his face.

Eveleth laughed, snugged down his hood and went out. Deliberately he left both inner and outer vestibule doors wide open and the hot humid stench-filled air surged in.

The proto-insects—the stingers and biters and bloodsuckers, all the myriad vicious flying creatures with which this overburdened planet abounded—came too. They circled and swarmed, buzzing in many tones.

But they did not alight and Dane soon realized why. They sensed the taint of *sbedico* about him and that stench was a warning and a terror to every other life-form of Venus.

Even the humanoid Venusites, who faced the huge jungle beasts unarmed and lightly clothed, were afraid of *sbedicos* and would not live in any area where the fiendish creatures were found.

For awhile Dane Coburn's brain teetered precariously between despair and madness. But then the drug in his system sent him off gradually into semi-consciousness.

Dane had come out to Venus five years before as a member of a very tentative new profession, one that had had so little success that in Toehold City it had become an unfunny joke. He was an alien psychologist.

The early exploratory rockets had found a planet potentially rich but pre-

senting almost unsurmountable difficulties. Climate, geography, the fierce magnetic storms, the miles-thick envelope of mist and fog, all conspired against Earthmen. But worst of all were the Venusian life-forms.

Everywhere on the planet life flourished with explosive fecundity and appalling deadliness. At the sea-edges seaweeds and fungoids mingled in decaying living gas-bubbling slime. Beyond the slime great sea monsters lived and battled and were sometimes killed by tiny fish of incredible virulence. The air was the kingdom of the proto-insects and the flying reptiles.

The land surface—from Man's point of view the most important—was even worse. Plant life rioted and struggled in jungles, killing and being killed, playing host and vector to deadly unclassified bacteria. Most plants, casualties had proved, were poisonous. The animals were either poison-carriers or vicious killers of tremendous strength.

Only the humanoid Venusites offered a contradiction to the law of *be deadly or perish*. They neither killed nor were killed although they wore no protective armor, carried no weapons.

But they were *aloof*, so aloof that little had been learned about them. They moved like ghosts through the jungles, so unobtrusive as to seem insubstantial. They were there but no Earthman knew in what numbers.

Earthmen had heard them speak occasionally but never enough to learn their language. And the Venusites had shown not the slightest desire for the flashy trade goods and mechanical gadgets brought across space from Earth. There was no record of a single hostile act, no record of a friendly act either. They remained strictly aloof.

The men from Earth were unable to classify these indigenous humanoids. Savages of low intelligence? Perhaps, although they did maintain mysterious underground dwellings in which they made free use of precious metals. They had no mechanical civilization.

But they did not need one. Somehow, in a manner that aroused in Earthmen a subconscious jealousy, they had come to terms with their brutal hostile environment, could wander unmolested through their jungles while Earthmen remained prisoners of their own mechanical protective devices.

The men from Earth were nervous about them for there was an uneasy *awareness* that came to most Earthmen whenever a Venusite was near, a feeling of *being watched*, a prickling sensation of the scalp. And Toehold City had been aptly named. The colonists faced alien conditions and unknown dangers and if the Venusites were to become actively hostile their position could become completely untenable.

SO the Control Board had decreed a policy of utmost caution.

But that was not enough. Without the friendship and cooperation of the Venusites, without their intimate knowledge of their native planet, the development of Venus would be a task of centuries if it could be accomplished at all.

Dane Coburn had undergone preparation consisting mostly of training in extreme receptivity and a process similar to psychoanalysis intended to reduce innate prejudices and make him conscious of the residue in order to discount it. It was his mission to learn *how* and *what* the Venusites thought, to establish contact.

An outpost station had been allotted him on Island Nineteen and except for infrequent visits to the Cylinder he had spent most of his time there alone. Aloneness was necessary for Venusites were seldom seen near the more heavily manned stations.

Time after time during the first year he had put on his swamp-suit and hood, holstered his Bristol, and spent hours tramping and blasting his way through the deadly jungles without seeing a single Venusite. However he had been *aware* of them in that strange way that without his specialized training would

have been almost unendurable.

During the second year he had begun to see them and had been pleasantly surprised at the *humanness* of their appearance. He had tried leaving gifts for them but always on coming back later he had found them untouched. He had tried following any Venusite he saw, being careful not to crowd or alarm them. At first they vanished in a most disconcerting manner but later a few had allowed him to follow them.

Those had been amazing trips. Dane was always sharply aware of the jungle perils, of the fact that without his suit and hood he would not last an hour. But the slender quiet meek-looking Venusites were lords of the jungle and most vicious monsters—creatures whose wild attacks Dane sometimes had difficulty stopping even with his deadly little Bristol—fled or stood aside for them.

He lost entirely any superior notion that the Venusites were unintelligent savages. He came to admire and respect them for their wonderful adaptation to their environment—and to fear them for their unknown potentialities.

At last he had actually spoken to two Venusites and had been answered! True the conversation had been limited to an exchange of names. One, an elderly male, had called himself Dvar.

The other, a young girl with a slender graceful figure attractive even by Earth standards, was named Mzlu. Dvar's wife? Daughter? Friend? Dane had as yet obtained no clear idea of their social and family relationships.

Slowly he began to regard them not as alien creatures but as *people*. There were differences but there were also too many similarities for mere chance. Somewhere in the dimness of time there must have been a common ancestry.

Then gradually he had become aware that *the Venusites seemed to know his plans and what he was thinking.*

There was only one conclusion and it rocked him back on his heels, filled him with dismay and hostile reactions, with suspicion and an emotional conviction that his mental privacy and his very individuality—which should be utterly inviolate—were being invaded. He had a hard time fighting down those feelings and without his specialized preparation he could never have done it.

Gradually he accepted the idea but not without mental turmoil, not without developing a frustrating feeling of being on the very brink of a great discovery without being able to reach it.

Then Barton Eveleth and two companions had come to Island Nineteen on a minerals prospecting trip, violating the usual standards of conduct by sneaking in without letting him know.

Dvar and Mzlu had appeared at the edge of Dane's station clearing. Their spoken words had been sheer gibberish but their gestures had been explicit and their facial expressions had lost their usual placidity. For Dane the *watched* feeling had been dreadfully intense.

They had led him through the jungle and he had found the three Earthmen pawing greedily through the ruins of a Venusite underground dwelling that had been broken open and wrecked with heavy Bristol fire. The faint greenish fog of a poison spray still hung in the air and with a shock that had made him retch Dane had seen several Venusite corpses in the ruins.

Through blind rage his mind had continued to function logically. His hand-Bristol was no match for the weapons of Eveleth's men. So he had caught a film of evidence with his infra-red camera and then run himself to exhaustion getting back to his station.

A break in the static had put him through to Toehold City with unusual promptness. Central had considered the case serious enough to dispatch two helicopters even in the face of a gathering magnetic storm that might disrupt their guide beam.

The shooting had started before Eveleth realized he had more than Dane to contend with and the fight of Earthman against Earthman had been nasty. Eveleth's two companions had been killed

and Eveleth himself captured. He had been taken back to the Cylinder, brazenly protesting that the Venusites were not human and therefore he had done nothing punishable.

He had been placed under restraint—but legalistic minds on the Control Board had caused one delay after another. It was, after all, a situation without precedent, with no laws to cover it.

GRADUALLY Dane recovered control of his mind though not of his body. His life was nearly done. The thought of death was nothing new or strange. Every Earthman on Venus faced death every day. Even the nearness of it he could accept with resignation. But the *manner* of it—

After a while the paralysis would wear off. And *he would not let his body become a breeding-carrion for sbedicos.*

Poison? As useless as plunging a knife into his own heart. Not even cyanide would have the slightest effect on the *sbedico* larvae. They would merely continue to feed on his dead flesh until they were ready to emerge.

His body would have to be totally destroyed. And with his hand-Bristol out of commission there was no way he could do it. He had no stocks of combustibles or explosives.

But perhaps the Venusites—

His thoughts veered away from his own fate. Eveleth was a killer and Dane had never detected in the Venusites the slightest trace of warlike preparation. They would stand no chance.

Any who escaped the renegade would still not be safe. Island Nineteen abounded in animal life and where flesh was available *sbedicos* could multiply at a rate almost impossible to believe. Within three or four days the fecund deadly creatures would overrun the entire island.

Even through the bleak bitterness of his own despair Dane Coburn felt shame—shame that his own race had produced a two-legged *sbedico* like Barton Eveleth.

He screamed aloud as the paralysis and anaesthesia ended abruptly. Eveleth would have enjoyed that scream.

Twelve spots on his body were afire and he could feel strange stirrings.

Twelve clusters—perhaps fifty eggs to a cluster—six hundred *sbedico* maggots. It took all his powers of will to keep from clawing and pounding and pummeling and scratching at the burning spots. But *Eveleth must not have a total victory.*

He left his cot and with slow, careful movements put on a shirt and pants. Then he started toward his swamp suit hanging in the vestibule.

But he stopped. The pressure and rubbing of the heavy suit might disturb one of the maggots.

And that must not happen—not yet.

He laughed mirthlessly, near hysteria. A few hours earlier he would never have considered setting foot outside without his suit and hood. Now it made no difference.

He knew—he had planned during the period of paralysis—what he had to do. Even if he could track Eveleth through the tangled mist-shrouded jungle the renegade would kill him without hesitation—but without destroying his body and the malignant little creatures developing within it.

He knew his last hours would be eternities of agony, of a nearly hopeless search through the jungle, of a dreadful effort to keep himself from disturbing the maggots and dying too soon. But it had to be done. He could not let himself accept the drugged stupor passing painlessly into death that was all his medicine chest had to offer. *The Venusites had to be warned.*

He went out into the yellow-grey Venusian midmorning, and habit made him carefully close both doors as though he would soon return. He laughed when he realized what he had done.

Dane was *in* the jungle. For the first time he breathed the heavy, humid air directly instead of through a hood filter.

The mingled smells—the musty reek of plant decay and the more acrid stench of rotting flesh, the overpowering aromatics some of the plants used to repel proto-insects and the subtle, uncannily nostalgic perfumes of drab little flowers—made him choke and gasp.

There were leaves rough as sandpaper to his bare hands, leaves smooth and polished, leaves sticky with viscid secretions. Tough rubbery vines and iron-hard tree trunks, massive solid-looking fungi that crumbled to dust and slime at a touch. Sounds—sounds he could not identify.

Water condensing from the eternal mist mingled with the sweat trickling down his collar. But he had to concentrate on seeing that no solid branch or object should bump against any of the twelve burning throbbing areas where *sbedico* maggots burrowed in his living flesh. The jungle was close, tangled, difficult to penetrate and now he had no hand-Bristol with which to blast a path.

At first he instinctively ducked and batted at the proto-insects swarming around him. Some of them, Earthmen had discovered, carried diseases. But none touched him. Around him clung the distinctive *sbedico* aura.

He kept moving—moving—moving—lost without his radio bleeper to guide him back to his station but not caring, kept going by hopeless determination.

Three eyes set in a close-spaced triangle glared amber from a dark thicket of spike-bushes. Dane stopped short. He knew those creatures. Twice the weight of a man—six legs—shaped like a heroin addict's hallucinations—stupid and ferocious and, with multiple semi-independent brains strung along a double spinal column, hard to stop even with a Bristol.

Now he was unarmed.

The thing crouched—and just then the wind veered.

The thing gave a shrill keening whine that even on this alien planet denoted terror. Then it was gone.

Dane started laughing and could not stop and the laughter swelled and burst and became an hysterical titter. He was as safe in the jungle as any Venusite.

Because he was walking death.

Abruptly his hysteria ended.

What if the Venusites too were afraid of him? They could so easily avoid him if they wanted to. *Would they?*

AFTER awhile the first bad spasm started in his left hip, spread down his leg and up his side. It was fire, it was the agony of gnawing and tearing, it was a swelling and stretching, it was a sharpening sting like spilled hydrofluoric acid. It was the ultimate horror of something malignantly alive inside his own body.

He caught a branch in one hand and a vine in the other—the only way he could keep himself from clawing at the focus of the pain.

A picture formed in his mind—of his body, dead, surrounded by a narrow ring where the plants had ceased to grow, shunned by the carrion-eaters, immune to bacteria and the explosive-growing fungi. He saw the *sbedicos* biting their way out through his shriveled skin, crawling out to kill and breed.

When the spasm ended, shivering despite the heat, weak and nauseated, Dane Coburn staggered blindly on.

The following hours were a horror of fatigue and growing despair and agony-spasms. Once he dropped to his knees and drank foul-tasting water from a stagnant pool, ignoring chances of poisoning or taking in spores that would sprout into fungi in his stomach. Those things no longer mattered.

He felt another spasm beginning—he had lost count of the number—and then suddenly he had the sensation of being *watched.*

It was familiar but still—even now—some ancient, atavistic impulse made the hairs on his neck prickle. Its basis in eerie ancestral fears had been lost to logic but preserved in instinct.

It meant a Venusite was near.

The gargling noise in his throat was

intended as a shout of joy. He knew—had guessed rather—that the *watched* feeling represented the impact of a Venusite thought-impression on his own brain. He tried to differentiate, to connect the nuances of *how* he was watched with an individual Venusite as he had done with occasional success during the past year.

But it was difficult, too alien to previous Earth experiences. Often—although it was contrary to his training—he had caught himself *tightening up*, trying to keep his mind closed against the Venusites.

There was something about telepathy, even limited telepathy, that evoked a frightened defenseless feeling which sublimated itself in angry resistance. When one's thoughts were open to a non-human, a non-Earth humanoid—

The agony-spasm was getting worse. He had a feeling it would be the last.

"Come here!" he called aloud, his voice rasping and hoarse. "I've got to talk to you!" Then he cursed, remembering the Venusites had never learned an Earth language.

The minutes seemed endless. The wracking pain mounted in intensity. Then with characteristic abruptness a Venusite appeared among the trees.

Tall—tall as an average Earthman but very slender. Pale skinned, almost fragile looking, but—this one was Dvar!

Dane Coburn was glad. Dvar was not his friend. There were no friendships between Venusites and Earthmen. But at least Dvar had little by little given up the Venusian habit of vanishing the instant an Earthman appeared.

The spasm reached a climax of Hell. Dane held his arms outstretched as though he were being crucified while every muscle of his body strained and writhed. But still he hoped the Venusite would understand and would do what was necessary.

He saw Dvar's mouth drop open, his eyes widen in a shocked, incredulous stare. In that instant he learned just how wrong was the idea so many Earthmen held that the Venusites were without emotions and were therefore inhuman despite their shape. Dvar was not only seeing but *feeling*. *"Kill me!"* Dane shrieked. *"Kill me! Now!"*

Dvar's mouth snapped shut and into Dane's mind came a clear thought-impression, of refusal, of horrified rejection. Dane knew he was reading the Venusite's thoughts!

Against his will his right hand moved downward, fingers clawing. And then suddenly the pain lessened though he could still feel the voracious *sbedico* maggots feeding and gnawing.

The end! He waited for the final convulsions to begin.

THEY did not start and gradually his eyes came back into focus and he was once more aware of his surroundings. Dvar's face was twisted now, contorted, and his slender body was twitching. Dane blinked. It didn't make sense that—

His mind was blank with surprise, blank and open. A thought roared in his brain and because it was one not concerned with concepts outside an Earthman's experience it translated itself into understandable words.

"Quickly! I can't stand much of this!"

There was more, not in words, that let Dane understand. Dane was *absorbing*.

A female Venusite was all at once near Dvar. Young, delicate-looking, but with an air of proud independence and competence. The one called Mzlu. In her brief skirt she looked dreadfully vulnerable and out of place in the deadly jungle.

His *watched* feeling redoubled and it was more than *watching*. He saw shock come into her face, saw her slender body tense and her bare pointed breasts heave as she gasped. Dvar's thoughts registered again. *"Quickly—if you can!"*

Dane felt the Venusite girl's mind withdraw, gather, then *surge*. Unconsciousness, quick and complete, swooped down upon him—and he welcomed it. He did not expect to awaken.

Yet he did to what he thought must be a dving dream.

The eternal fog-mist was still there—but no longer such a hindrance to vision. His vision was different too. He saw, despite the subdued light of the screened-out sun, with a new and almost painful clarity. The colors! The jungle rioted in shades so *different* he he had no names for them.

The smells! Before there had been only a single jungle reek. Now he could distinguish each component and understand the significance of each. His ears too were able to sort out and classify the hundreds of individual sounds that made up the restless never-ceasing thrum of the jungle. These were *human* senses although abnormal.

He was aware of thoughts too. Numberless mental currents twitched and tugged at the edges of his brain undecipherably. Dvar and Mzlu were gone. *Or were they nearby with their minds closed against him, waiting for him to die?*

He lay on a mat of moss and rotting leaves and was *aware* that nearby crouched a thing like a giant weasel with a hairless green skin. It was considering him as food.

Dane Coburn was beyond fright.

But the weasel-thing was considering him as food.

He thought of a huge gray shape, not visualizing it clearly except for a gaping mouth armed with row upon row of serrated teeth. On a whim, he thought the teeth a brilliant crimson.

And he thought of the gray shape creeping up behind the weasel-thing. As he let the idea gather in his mind he had an astonished feeling that somewhere, in another world or another life, he had done this before.

He *pushed* and knew how.

His ears caught a snarl and then the crackle of underbrush. He stopped *pushing* and *listened.* The weasel's thought-thread was weak with distance and chaotic with terror.

He became conscious once again of his own body, waiting for the squirming and gnawing of the *sbedico* larvae in his flesh. *How long to live?*

A proto-insect buzzed once around his head and settled on his cheek. He felt an itch, painful and extremely distracting, and he reached up and slapped the insect to a pulp before he consciously realized that it had bitten him.

It had bitten him. And the weasel-thing had considered him as food.

And in the places where the *sbedico* had injected its vile eggs lay pain—*but a different sort of pain.*

He stood up, groaning at the stiffness of his joints, unfastened his belt and zipper and let his pants drop around his ankles. There were scars—twelve of them. Red lines, still caked with dried blood. They looked like—they were—*surgical* scars.

Very lightly and tentatively he touched one. Tender to finger pressure—but with the pain of a clean cut rather than an obscene infestation or ulcerating infection.

Automatically he reached down and pulled up his pants, his brain whirling. There was but one possible answer and that was incredible. *Sbedicos,* both adult and larval, were unaffected by nearly all drugs. And yet those larvae had been immobilized to permit surgical removal. Impossible, yet—

Only the Venusites could.

HE brushed several crawling things off a fallen tree trunk and sat down. His brain, dull and confused, refused to operate and finally he surrendered and relaxed.

Gradually a direction intruded itself into his mind—a direction and a purpose. He got up and started walking. Many times he had to turn aside to avoid close-matted or thorny patches but always this new sense guided him back.

Several times he encountered large animals but now he knew how to deal with them. His projected thought-monsters sent them scuttling away.

He understood at last how the Ve-

nusites were able to survive without weapons or heavy protective armor in their deadly peril-ridden jungle. Their way was not the Earthman's way—it was their own. *But now it was his also.*

His muscles were sore and weary and it had been—how long?—since he had eaten. His wristwatch had stopped and the diffused light of the tedious eighty-hour day gave him no clue. Sweating had left him dehydrated and thirsty, but he no longer dared drink from the jungle pools.

A growling vibrating roar caught his ears, the sound of a heavy Bristol blasting at full power. Dane stopped. A pitifully inadequate pocket knife was his only weapon and a mounted Bristol meant—

He hurried on, then stopped once more, stopped and relaxed until his labored breathing eased and the thud of his speeded pulse stopped ringing in his ears. Then, with the mental trick he did not understand, he *listened*, trying to ignore the mutter of low-intelligence impulses from the jungle creatures.

Without warning, with stark clarity, a thought-impression burst upon him. It was Earthman-thought, every image of it clearly understandable, every connotation present. Hate and greed were its emotions and its images—

Dane winced and instinctively clapped his hands to his ears. The contact broke but for a full minute it left behind a pounding headache. Those thoughts had come from the wrong side of the nebulous borderline of sanity.

He moved ahead once more, guided now by the Bristol's roar.

He almost missed the angular outlines of the heavy amphibian, the only vehicle Earthmen had found capable of coping with Venusian terrain. All amphibs were painted fluorescent chrome yellow to make them easy to spot in case of breakdowns but this one had been daubed with green and brown and gray to blend with the jungle. That established its identity.

It wasn't moving but as Dane watched the stubby turret-mount Bristol traversed slightly, depressed, cut loose with another growling burst. The ground erupted in smoke and dust and one large tree fell with a shattering crash.

Dane crept nearer, moving cautiously, very conscious that the turret was full-swing. The mental patterns of the days before Eveleth had released the *sbedico* in his station were reasserting themselves. Now that he was no longer resigned to death he had remembered how to be afraid.

The wind blew the dust cloud aside, and Dane swore under his breath. Eveleth was fulfilling his threat, blasting into an underground Venusite dwelling in a greedy lust for the metals his spectro-detector had disclosed.

In the mouth of one shattered tunnel lay a pale slender corpse. Half the head was gone. Sheer rage made Dane grit his teeth and his mind settled on the word "execute" rather than "kill" in formulating his response.

But the door of the amphibian was sealed and the hull undoubtedly carried the usual lethal electric charge. Eveleth was beyond reach and in Dane's mind frustration built to a torturing pitch.

Blocked, submerged memories began to circulate in his brain, working up from his deep subconscious—dim and incomplete memories.

He had been in just such an underground dwelling, taken there by Dvar and Mzlu. *This one? Was that body down there—?*

If so *a part of himself had died.*

There was a vague—very vague—half-memory of their brains probing at his while he lay unconscious. And that probing had of necessity been a reciprocal process. They had laid their own thoughts open to him also if he could remember them.

All his training made him want to coax these half-memories to clarity and examine them one by one—for there in a single package was the knowledge he had sought so vainly for so long.

But resolutely he fought them down, knowing as he did so that many might thus be lost beyond conscious recall. He had a debt to pay, yet Eveleth was impregnable in his amphibian. Even when he came out he would be alert and armed.

A SMALL worm crawled on rudimentary legs across his bare ankle. Dane shuddered as he brushed it away. It had felt so much like—

The delicate efficient protective mechanisms of the human brain had done their best to expunge those memories. *But they were still there.*

Suddenly Dane Coburn realized he was not unarmed. He carried a Venusian weapon. He remembered how a *sbedico* looked and how it smelled and how it moved and the sounds it made.

He *pushed.* Kept *pushing.*

The air filled with the crackle of the hull charge grounding off. The amphib's door popped open. Barton Eveleth jumped down without touching the grab-irons. With his left hand he was still snugging down his hood. He crouched tensely, his hand-Bristol centering on the amphib's doorway.

Dane knew he could not maintain the impression. It was too exhausting. If Eveleth recovered his nerve and climbed back in he would find nothing and might be suspicious. Then he could resist.

More!

Dane dredged memories from the depths of his mind, and could almost feel his brain tissues writhe. *The feel of a sbedico against his bare skin. The strange, shuddery numbness of its ovipositor secretions.* He remembered—*remembered* — REMEMBERED! How vividly he remembered!

Once more he *pushed.*

Eveleth clawed at his hood, flung it aside and his face was hardly recognizable. He screamed. He dropped his hand-Bristol and tore at the fastenings of his swamp-suit. Then he tried to run away from himself.

A few seconds later, somewhere in the jungle, he screamed again—once.

After awhile, mentally and physically exhausted, Dane Coburn stood up and stared bleakly at the wreakage. Later the Venusites who had escaped would return. How they disposed of their murdered dead then was entirely their own business. An Earthman, an alien, should not be present.

And he felt that somehow it would be indecent to leave the vehicle of the murderer here.

He climbed in, remembering the nearby terrain and the deep swamp not too far away. He put the right track in reverse, braked the left, swung the big machine until it pointed in the right direction. Then he set both treads in the slow powerful compound creeper gear, engaged the master clutch and swung out through the door.

The ponderous machine crushed its way into the thick Venusian jungle.

Somehow he got back to his station. He knew he should have found it fascinating or at least startling to have transcended ordinary human limitations as he had but his emotions were temporarily burned to dull embers of weariness.

For two of the long Venusian days he remained inside. He was weak and sore and his movements were so uncoordinated he had trouble even preparing his meals.

He felt deeply and bitterly depressed, plagued by a sense of loss. *He could not remember.* The things that had happened to him, the things he had learned, the things he had done—all were as insubstantial as dreams of smoke.

Only the broken power tubes for the radio, his useless hand-Bristol, the mess on the floor where Eveleth had crushed the *sbedico,* the twelve rapidly healing incisions on his own body kept him from believing it all an hallucination.

During the middle of the third day three large fluorescent-painted amphibians pulled into his clearing with a clanking of treads. Dane rushed to the window. Supplies were not due for an-

other two weeks and not enough time had passed to make his lack of radio contact call for investigation.

Fifteen hooded swamp-suited men climbed from the vehicles, their waists heavy with holster belts, but still the three turret-Bristols maintained a slow alert traverse.

Dane started climbing into his suit to meet them, then paused, halted by a pulling, tugging sensation inside his head and the *watched* feeling again.

A Venusite. He recognized the thought-pattern—Mzlu. And in a confused unclear way he received the impression of a request for a favor, a *permission.*

He nodded, the motion of his head automatic. Instantly, almost before he realized he had reestablished contact with the Venusites and should be happy about it, he felt a psychic block going up, a process of positive forgetting.

He finished fastening his suit, opened the outer door. A dozen weapons swung to cover him. One of the men came forward, keeping clear of the line of fire, and peered through his hood facepiece.

"Okay," he called back and the weapons swung to cover the surrounding jungle. Then, to Dane, "Why don't you answer your radio?"

"It's out of order. What's going on? What brings you here?" he heard himself asking.

"Eveleth slugged a guard and got away," the leader said grimly. "You seen him?"

"Good Lord, *no!*" Dane blurted.

It was not altogether a deliberate lie. His brain seemed divided into two parts. The part controlling his actions was in itself controlled. The other section remembered but could do nothing.

"One of the magnetic tracers picked up an unscheduled vehicle. Before it went out of range it was headed this way and Eveleth had sworn to get you."

Dane whistled in dismay.

The search crew declined his invitation to come inside; they had no time to lose in their needle-in-a-haystack search. They did, however, insist he take a semi-portable Bristol, a rifle with a clip of explosive shells and a new power tube for his radio.

SOON he was alone again and almost at once the two portions of his brain merged. He felt guilty—but only slightly guilty—for deceiving the men from Toehold City and letting them continue a useless search. His impulse to call them by radiophone was weak and abortive.

Instead he called mentally to Mzlu and this time he remebered the trick of *pushing.* He received a strong impression of caution and of waiting—and then the contact broke.

He waited and several things gradually cleared themselves in his mind.

The Venusites were not so different from Earthmen after all. Similarities far outweighed differences. Common ancestry. He had been taught—was being taught—and he was a normal Earthman. That meant the telepathic ability of the Venusites was not some strange and unnatural mental *quality.* Rather it was a different *use* of the mind.

So other Earthmen—all or many or at least some—could with proper guidance acquire the ability also. Perhaps, if they knew what to expect, they could learn without going to the very edge of death as he had.

But that could—would—create an unmitigated hell. He had seen what a dreadful weapon telepathy could be. He had used it himself. And there were the deeply rooted ingrown prejudices to be considered.

He understood at last the reason for the Venusites' aloofness. They were excellent alien psychologists themselves and had predicted the reactions of Earthmen to telepathy. They had realized they would not be able to hide their ability, had known it was easier to avoid the formation of hostile attitudes than to counteract them once they had become established. Sudden precipitate disclosure could have resulted only in flaming

hatred—and still could. Therefore aloofness was the lesser of the evils.

The radiophone buzzed and as he lifted the handpiece the *watched* feeling crept over him again. But this time there was no pressure, no control—merely contact. "Foster, mobile nine, calling Coburn, station nineteen," he heard through crackling static.

"Go ahead. You get him?" he asked.

"Coburn, your guardian angel was riding your shoulder," the answer came back. "Eveleth was on this island, headed your way."

"But you got him?"

"No. But he's dead."

"Huh?"

"Found his amphib in a swamp, door open and full of mud. Tow cable snapped when we tried to drag it out and it went on down out of sight."

"And Eveleth?"

"We backtracked through the jungle, maybe half a mile. Found a loaded hand-Bristol and an empty swamp suit. Eveleth's—looks like he ripped it off."

For a few seconds there was only the hiss and sputter of a distant magnetic storm. Then Foster spoke again. "Guess we'll never know what happened. Venus is a queer place."

"Guess not," Dane agreed. He smiled wryly to himself. He had no mental blockage now and could have spoken. But he knew he should not.

"We're calling our job finished and heading for the Cylinder now," Foster concluded. "Over and out."

"Seventy-three," Dane signed off.

After an hour, time for Foster's crews to crash and Bristol-blast their way through to the beach and slither their big machines down into the water, Dane Coburn knew he was once more the only Earthman on Island Nineteen.

He began to feel a tingling anticipation, a restlessness, a boundless curiosity. A whole new world was—

"Yes." The thought registered in his mind and he recognized the sender.

There was no putting on of a heavy suit, no checking of a hood filter, no buckling on a holster and spare charges. He merely closed the inner door of the vestibule, then opened the outer one.

FOR a few seconds he wheezed in the hot stench-filled air. Then it became —acceptable.

Through the mist he distinguished a white figure at the edge of the clearing. Mzlu was waiting for him.

He hurried toward her, eager now, and all at once the mist seemed to thin and the jungle took on vivid, unearthly colors. He was *seeing differently.*

She touched his hand and smiled and that response of facial muscles was the same on Venus as on Earth. The words she spoke were strange but her thoughts came through clearly. Understanding, approval, friendship—and acceptance as though he had passed a crucial test.

He knew Venus would make several slow spins on its axis before he saw his station again, that after these coming days he would never be quite the same again. But for that matter he was not the same even now.

Now, after living *against* Venus, fighting the planet, insulating themselves from it with the Cylinder and the amphibians and the sealed outpost stations and the heavy swamp suits—now there was a possibility that Earthmen could learn to live *on* and *with* Venus, unshielded and unafraid.

But that would have to come very slowly. He was the first. Sooner or later there would be a second who would *understand,* and then a third. He could imagine the knowledge spreading from Earthman to Earthman as prejudices were overcome.

As he and Mzlu moved off into the jungle he tried to guess the shape of the future. The Earthmen who came to Venus would change their ideas and ways. The Venusites too would change.

There would be closer contact, cooperation. A common ancestry—did that indicate eventual inter-marriage? Little by little there would evolve—

What?

THE READER SPEAKS

(Continued from page 6)

of fans and a lot of fan clubs scattered all over the world. There is the nucleus of an international organization which speaks a common language—science. A lot of fans are at loose ends and a lot of clubs have little energy because they lack a constructive program. Well, here's one:

Organize a movement to modernize the present obsolete city. Get the fan clubs behind it and get some progressive architects interested. Carry a torch, tie your interest in science fiction to a constructive and logical outgrowth of that interest.

Of course change is coming anyway. But change isn't self-germinating. It comes as a result of work. Frequently enough it has to overcome the resistance of vested interests, inertia, or plain ordinary stupidity. So there's a suggestion for cooperative fan activity. And in the fact that the top brass of the biggest city is seriously considering a plan which sounds like science fiction is an indication that you've got a wedge.

LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

ONE thing about the fans—they're never at a loss for words. So with no further introduction from me, let us plunge headlong into the letters.

FAREWELL
by J. T. Oliver

Dear Mr. Mines: After reading Mr. Merwin's sad farewell address, I reckon I'll just have to forgive him for all the things I've ever held against him. He is a nice guy and he never did insult me, or anything. I will even forgive him for writing sf stories with a female poet as the viewpoint character. After all, I suppose he had to try and sell the women too. And this maturity deal is okay too. Fact is, I agree with him, except that I don't believe a story has to have middle-aged characters to be mature. Take, for instance, a lot of Bradbury's work. And a lot of the non-fantasy books feature young characters, but they are very adult in treatment. I'm rather sorry to see him leave; he really improved the mags a lot while he had them. I hope you will keep it up.

Best thing this issue was THE RETURN by Matheson. He is a genius and a fine writer.—*315-27th Street, Columbus, Ga.*

P.S. Will you please print this so Merwin will see it?

If he's looking, he will. Maturity doesn't have too much to do with chronological age. That is, it's difficult for a very young person to be mature, but just because a person is older is no proof he's mature. Get it? Then explain it to me.

UNHEARD OF
by Wanda Reid

Dear Sir: May an average, unheard-of fan get into the discussion of maturity in Science Fiction? I consider myself a very ordinary SF reader, and a very ordinary person, so perhaps I can speak for other average readers.

Now, to the question of maturity; most of the letters I have read in your mags seem to be written by one of two distinct types of readers, both of whom define "maturity" and "immaturity" the same way, in slightly different degrees. To the boosters for "maturity", anything except pure science or gadget stories are for the birds. To the opposite factor, any stories above the Cap Future level are longhair.

I, personally, outgrew the stories aimed at the chandelier acrobatics mentality in my second year of fandom. I believe most people do the same. On the other hand, I find the "mature" fiction, so loudly acclaimed by some, unbearably dull. So, I think, do my peers.

Mature fiction of any type, is, to my way of thinking, good characterization, sensitivity to human emotions, and skilful handling of a good basic plot. Prime example, Heinlein's JERRY IS A MAN, which I consider his masterpiece. And for humor, who could possibly call THE IRRITATED PEOPLE immature? For more random examples, what is immature about MR. ZYTZTZ GOES TO MARS or THE LAKE OF THE GONE FOREVER? If the foregoing sounds as though I agree with ex-editor Merwin about many things, it's probably because I do. I hope, sir, that I agree as closely with you. If I don't, I'll be writing more letters.

I've had my say, now, and I expect a barrage of angry letters from people who feel insulted. That is, if this letter is published. Oh, well, if the shoe fits—

One more thing, I wish some SF fans in my locality would look me up. It's rather dull, having only my brother to discuss the mags with, as we know each other's opinions so thoroughly.—*818 Garner Ave., Salinas, Calif.*

You agree with me too. A mature story doesn't necessarily indicate a story which discusses esoteric matters too chandelier for all but a chosen few. It means, among other things, a story which is not juvenile, not childish, not crudely written. It means a story which is effective dramatically, realistic enough to convince the reader, intelligent enough to deal honestly with its problems. The worst of it is,

what is mature to one reader is borscht to another.

MORE ON MORON
by Jack M. Bickham

Dear Mr. Mines: This is frankly an answer to a letter from another fan. As he saw fit to chastise me in public, I ask that you give me a chance to justify myself in a like manner.

I'm not exactly a newcomer to the letter column, having been an occasional participant since 1944. I have always felt that the letter section was more a friendly place for a "bull-session" than anything else. But this letter of Bud Walker, in the October TWS, changed my mind for me.

About three months ago, Sam Merwin had a short article on the Einsteinian concept and its meanings. He asked that anyone interested would write in their particular views on it. I did so. I did not pretend to be profound or intelligent; I just had a few general ideas that needed letting out, and admitted it. But now, in the issue of TWS already cited, there appears what I consider to be a very arrogant and personally insulting letter which pretends to refute everything that I said. I don't want to start a feud. The emotional tenor of Mr. Walker's letter indicates that he is not the type person I want to associate with in any way. But I do want to make a few points clear because I like SFdom as a whole, and don't want to be considered a moron, as Walker so broadly hints.

Mr. Walker says that there are no paradoxes in nature, but that they are only the resultant confused concepts of "feeble minds." That's nice. But what about the conflict of evidence between the two schools of thought on energy? Measure it one way, energy is wave-motion; measure it another, energy is corpuscular. I am not saying that it is both, but obviously all the evidence so far is paradoxical. If Mr. Walker says there are no such things in nature, he should advise our leading scientists of the fact. If, viewing only experimental fact from our frame of reference, he cannot see paradox, then he is the greatest genius in the history of this or any universe. Of *apparent* paradox —my meaning—there is plenty.

In my letter, I was stating facts as they would be realized from *this* frame of reference. I thought that was obvious. But perhaps Mr. Walker needs things spelled out for him because he is lost in the labyrinthian jungles of his own ego.

Mr. Walker states that he could easily disprove the theory that all is timeless at the speed of light "a man at the speed of light would not grow old," etc. Why should he? *I* didn't say that. He *assumed* that I did. Ungrounded assumptions should be strict taboo for all brilliant men of Walker's calibre. And it's news to me that the negative side of any argument can be proved without evidence.

There could be more, but what's the sense in it? I wrote the first letter for kicks, and I got them in an unexpected place. I don't have a "divine mission" to instruct the ignorant, as Mr. Walker seems to have. So there's no need to carry my arguments to great—and insulting—degrees. Whenever I begin to think that everything is simple and easy, I just look at a night sky or a newspaper. None of us know much, and the greatest danger today is unwarranted egotism and conceit. I was wrong—maybe. Okay. But let's not play God, Mr. Walker.

And thanks to you, Mr. Mines. Lots of luck.—*767 Racine Ave., Columbus 4, Ohio.*

Glad you didn't want to start a feud, Jack. Nothing like a few nice clean insults to cement a friendship.

REMINISCENCE
by Bill Deppe

Dear Sam: Since the old editor was reminiscing, in the last ish, about old TWS issues; I will go even further and talk about the FIRST issue of TWS. It was a dilly. It is very familiar, since I just acquired a copy last week.

To start at the beginning, let's look at the cover of the August, 1936 issue. The name of the mag is printed same as today. The illustration is of the story LAND THAT TIME FORGOT. It has a B E M and a present day man being attacked by men from the past. The old covers were entirely different from ones of today. At the bottom of this first issue is the subheading "Stranger Than Truth."

Now for the inside of the book. In the first place the contents page had a few items that have since been dropped. They were: (1) Science Fiction League emblem. (2) Subtitle "The Magazine of Prophetic Fiction." (3) An "In the Next Issue" column. (4) A note called "On the Cover."

Here is a list of the stories featured in that 1936 ish. The novelettes were:

BLOOD OF THE MOON by Ray Cummings.
THE HORMONE MENACE by Eando Binder.
THE CIRCLE OF ZERO by Stanley G. Weinbaum.
LAND WHERE TIME STOOD STILL by Arthur Leo Zagat.
DEATH DIVES DEEP by Paul Ernest.

The Short Stories were:

THE DRONE MAN by A. Merritt.
THE NTH. DEGREE by Mort Weisinger.
REVENGE OF THE ROBOT by Otis Adelbert Kline.

Special Picture Story Feature:

ZARNAK by Max Plaisted.

The usual features (Letter column, reviews, etc.) and illos for all stories were of course included. I don't try to rate this issue against today but will leave that up to you.

While on the subject of back issues I know all you fans (like me) have missed many issues of SF mags. Well I think I can help you (as well as myself). I want to start a swap headquarters. Anyone interested in trading just send me 10 or 15 old SF mags or pocket books and ONE DOLLAR and I will return an equal number (all different) to you by return mail. I am not a dealer, just a fan who doesn't have the cash to keep up with all of the SF mags. There are too durn many. I will also accept comic books published before 1942. First issues (any mags) and foreign get special value. Write me about yours.

Does anyone know where I can get a listing of all the magazines issued in the U. S., including date of first ish?

If anyone is interested I have the first issue of the original Science Wonder, from way back in

the 20's, and I will describe it in another letter.—*12 South Sixth Street, Wilmington, N. C.*

If the first issue of TWS still strikes you as a dilly, it must be some mag, all right.

REQUEST
by Dr. D. E. Wood

Dear Editor: I have read your magazine for years, but this is my first fan letter and I am sorry that it has to be a begging one. But maybe after I explain you will forgive me. You see, I am the Secretary of "The Shut-In Club" with 136 members. Believe me, it can get mighty lonely month in and month out until death relieves you. No, none of us are kicking. We take things day by day as they come. But some of you S.F. fans can make our days lighter.

We would welcome any old copies of science-fiction magazines. Send them to Dr. D. E. Wood, Secretary, "The Shut-In Club" at 1194½ Coker St., Memphis, Tenn. You'll never know how grateful this gang will be to get them and to pass some of the long hours reading them. Please remember there are 136 of us and all adults, so you can't send too many. Each one will be a lot more welcome than you could ever realize.—*1194½ Coker Street, Memphis, Tenn.*

If you've been looking for a good deed to do, you couldn't find a better one than by sending some reading matter to people who are confined to their beds or homes. Though we're speaking of science fiction, there's no real reason why you have to draw the line there. Send anything you can.

FEMININE DEFLECTION
by Joe Gibson

Dear Mines: So it was Alex Schomburg, not Earle Bergey, who did the Octtws cover! That spiral missile-loading ramp—I can't figure any other purpose for it, since it has no relationship to the "spiral orbits" mentioned in the story—was quite similar to Bergey's style. That and the lack of signature fooled me. But Lin Carter implies that Schomburg has been around before. When? During WW2, perhaps? Wesso I remember, but not Schomburg, and his latest efforts indicate I should.

But artwork is an integral part of science fiction—something most book publishers should consider—and the return of an artist of Schomburg's calibre at a time when there's precious little good stf artwork around is quite intriguing. What else and how much better can he do, I wonder? And how well will he do if he reverts occasionally to unclad femmes on the covers? Believe it was Astra Bradley who wondered about readers who object to unclad cover-gals, then howl for more Finlay. It's probably just a matter of resignation to the inevitable and a dying struggle of good taste; if we must be caught with a magazine featuring unclad gals, at least make 'em well-drawn! After all, one just doesn't appreciate any unclad babe.

Then, of course, one should consider that unclad, well-drawn gals are much more appreciable at the proper place and time. From this, we could go into quite a discussion of Einstein's theory of space-time relativity, and his more recent unified field theory which is quite conclusive on the matter, but then we'd run onto someone like Jack Bickham or Bud Walker who'd start introducing parameters and the party would break up in confusion. We were discussing artists, weren't we? The devil with artists. As for the observable properties of light, Shelby Vick claims to have found some quite admirable measurements in Florida regarding certain emotional deflections of light by feminine objects. But he still maintains that no such observations can be made among females who read science fiction, to which I still disagree. Some strikingly attractive observations can be made. Clarifying this further: these gals are not only pleasing accompaniment to light properties, but they also have remarkable psi qualities. This makes observation somewhat problematical, since you seldom find one unless she approves of what you have in mind. Perhaps Shel isn't using the proper equipment. There is, quite definitely, a difference between the beautiful gals who read science fiction and beautiful gals. But it isn't obvious.

Naturally, I shall now be ordered to put up or shut up—and, just as naturally, I shall shut up. It's enough to say they're there. But the intrinsic value of the speed of light depends entirely on what you do with it. Einstein merely callibrated it for electronic computors; he lets the Universe prove it. However, these discussions can be illuminating.—*24 Kensington Ave., Jersey City 4, N. J.*

Joe rightly poses the question: are adult males uninterested in female pulchritude human? To which a certain segment of fandom howls, "Who cares? We want rockets!" Well, it has been my observation, over a long and not too sinful career, that everywhere men go, you somehow manage to see a female tagging along. And I have no doubt whatever that shortly after the first rocket ship goes chugging up towards the stars, women will be going right along with their males. Thus the apparent anomaly of bewitching babes in rocket ships is not as irregular as it seems. They'll be there—mark my words!

FINANCIAL REPORT
by Joe Reitano

Dear Mr. Mines: In answer to a recent letter, Mr. Merwin said that as of now it is impossible to put TWS and STARTLING on a monthly basis. Even when the mags were large size and fen wanted them monthly. In view of the recent cut in pages and size I have a suggestion. Hike the price to 30c. In this way you can enlarge the mags up to 180 pages. A 146 page magazine is not very satisfying, especially if it is a bi-monthly. Besides, you may be able to attract more readers with a larger magazine.

My favorite tale for the October TWS was Matheson's RETURN. Keep his stories coming. I would also like to see stories by Kuttner, Bradbury, Heinlein, Hubbard, Leinster, Sturgeon and

van Vogt.—*163 East 3rd Street, Mt. Vernon, N. Y.*

At the time Merwin answered you there was no thought of changing the magazine's schedule. Since then, STARTLING has gone on a monthly basis, you'll be glad to know. So far as your suggestion for hiking the price and size of the magazines, you've got kind of an optimistic idea of what a nickel will buy.

As for your requests: there'll be a Murray Leinster story in the April TWS called THE WEEK AFTER NEXT and a short novel by the same gifted typewriter in the June issue called THE GADGET HAD A GHOST. There should also be a Matheson shortie in that issue called THE FOODLEGGER, which should make you happy. And the March STARTLING STORIES is featuring the first full-length Kuttner novel in four years, WELL OF THE WORLDS—a dilly of a story. Will that hold you for awhile?

BITE OF THE BUG

by Mildred E. Kamine

Dear Sir: Having just been bitten by the science-fiction bug, I may sound quite ignorant but I must ask what does the "t" stand for in the "stf" you so often write about? I can figure the s and the f but not the t.

May I pass a bouquet for your magazine? Being a housewife with a background of high school physics and chemistry far behind me, I find the stories in your magazine readable, understandable and enjoyable. I've tried to get STARTLING Stories but either there are too many science fiction fans here who gobble up the magazine before I get to the newsstand or else the newsstand hasn't heard about it yet. Since coming to this state four months ago and being bitten by the bug, I've spent more time searching for science fiction than reading it. Whatever I get I read immediately, much to the disgruntlement of my husband and family. Hubby claims I spend too much time on it and neglect his dinner. The kids claim I'm always reading when they want me to play with them.

I've been lucky enough to get some books from the base library near here but they don't carry any of the magazines and I've promised to pass on to the G.I.'s any I can find. If any of your readers care to discard old copies of their sf magazines which will be handed to the Air Force men, would appreciate receiving them. So far, I've only been able to obtain TWS for October, WSA for the summer, and ASF since May. Incidentally RETURN impressed me as more in the weird story line than scientific, but it makes an excellent transitional story from a fan of horror and ghost stories to one of science fiction.

I liked your October cover and so did my 8 year old son. I hid the WSA annual from his prying but still innocent eyes for fear of having to answer a dozen searching questions about its lurid cover. He is getting interested in sf too but so far limits himself to enjoyment of the SF comics and Space Patrol on the radio.—*2076 Havana, Aurora, Colorado.*

The "t" comes out of scienti-fiction, which is the way it is sometimes written, but not very much any more. Anyway, stf, pronounced stiff, is a good handy label. We might add, welcome to the ranks, and welcome to the 8 year old son. His interest doesn't surprise me and if it does, you go back and re-read my editorial in the December issue.

THE ACID TOUCH

by John Brunner

Dear Sam: Pity I can't call you Lem anymore. I rather fancied meeting a guy called Mutton some day—now I never shall. . . .

I shove in my oar because I have a nice long one to shove. (Two issues of SS and four of TWS, which I enjoyed immensely) and primarily at that, because I was so pleased with the first I ever saw that even the Bergey babes haven't shaken me off. Would that I could conjure dollars from a hat . . . still, Walt Willis is a good lad.

So far, I haven't done what I intended to do. I'll do it.

I'll say: I like both your zines a lot. They aren't the best I've ever read; but they are the best I've seen for at least a year. A certain digest-sized competitor of yours has slipped (pardon, but your show is slipping) and I haven't yet seen another one that recently emerged, but all the same I enjoy yours.

Points: Who said Ed Hamilton couldn't write? I did, several times. After reading SS's BIRTHPLACE OF CREATION—never again! He can. Vance is going someplace, at least. SON OF THE TREE was but good. I don't know what you did to Matt Lee, but LETTERS OF FIRE was great. McDowell was a hack to me until I read his I, THE UN-MORTAL. As for Fyfe, he's never been bad, but TEMPORARY KEEPER was star quality.

Further I'm glad to know jazz has some value in the defense of the planet. I'm a fan. See THE WALLS CAME TUMBLING DOWN.—*Cheltondale, Cheltenham, England.*

The thing that gets us is that everybody howls about the Bergey babes and as soon as they take a leave of absence and are replaced by machinery, everybody wants them back. The general reaction is, "Whee! Schomburg, but let's have a Bergey babe once in a while." Personally, we believe in variety—the more different kinds of cover there are, the better. Will you buy that?

SOCIAL

by Mrs. Bette Pratt

some time. Just never sent a line your way before.

Liked all of the October issue, except for Matheson's RETURN. It was well written—I just don't care for the type.

Get a big kick out of the letters in THE READER SPEAKS. First part of the mag I turn to.

Should this be printed, I'd love to hear from other TWS readers.—*P. O. Box 192, Harwich, Mass.*

You'll hear from them all right. Especially the ones who thought RETURN was the greatest short story since Bradbury.

SHORTAGE
by Mrs. E. Barker

Dear Editor: I hope I'm not presuming too much on your kindness by asking for your assistance. I have in my possession the first real American science-fiction magazine for two years or more. It is THRILLING WONDER STORIES for June, 1951, containing SON OF THE TREE by Jack Vance. It was a most enjoyable issue. During the war and since, I managed to get several issues of TWS and SS, and read such outstanding stories as Weinbaum's BLACK FLAME and PYGMALION SPECTACLES and the Hollywood On The Moon stories. Now I am unable to obtain TWS, SS or any other stf magazines except British reprints. If any of your American readers have any magazines lying around that they don't want, I should deeply appreciate having them. Possibly there is something I could send them in return.—*5 Jasmond Rd. Cosham, Hants., England.*

Here's another chance for a good deed. And if there's some souvenir of England you've been longing for, maybe you can swap with Mrs. B.

REVIEW
by Bob Hoskins

Dear Sam: I shall miss Sam Merwin, Jr. He brought the Thrilling science fantasy publications up to their present high quality, as compared with the hackish issues that reached the public before the mantle of editorship fell upon his shoulders. His has been a most difficult task, and one wonders how he was able to stick it out for so long, considering the constant beating he received from the fans.

My only hope is that you will be able to do as well.

Simultaneous with the change of editors, we had a change of cover artists. What happened to the venerable, though oft-abused Bergey? When he sticks to straight-space covers, he doesn't do a bad job at all. But Schomburg goes him a dozen better, to give us the best covers that have graced either TWS or SS since the Summer, 1945 SS. Again, I only hope you—and he—keep it up.

Haven't read any of the stories as yet, so cannot comment on same. The longer jobs look quite good, with the shorter ones apparently holding their own. The illustrations are rank.

Due to the scant perusal I have thus-far been able to give this issue, I shall shortly close this missive, and be on my way. But first, a plug:

The ISFCC—the International Science Fiction Correspondence Club—is constantly seeking new members. It is one of the better fan clubs in existence. We publish a bi-monthly magazine, *The Explorer,* subscription to which is the only financial requirement for membership. You have an excerpt from this in the current Frying Pan, for which, many thanks. Was glad to see Merwin's answer.

For further information, write either Ed Noble, Jr., Box 49, Girard, Pennsylvania, or myself.—*Lyons Falls, New York.*

As explained a minute ago, Bergey is not lost to us. His style is particularly well adapted toward delineating certain phases of—ahem—Nature's handiwork. There are stories which cry for Bergey and thus we have planned some covers with him, which, in the light of stf's constantly expanding maturity, we confidently expect to be knockouts. There's a Bergey on the cover of this issue, and see also SS's cover for the St. Clair story, VULCAN'S DOLLS.

A FAN FOR THE FRYING
by Chester A. Polk

Dear Mr. Mines: This will be just a short letter, to tell you how much I have enjoyed reading TWS, since I first discovered science fiction a little more than a year ago. I think the fan-letter departments in TWS and SS both are among the best in any magazines, and I sincerely hope you will continue to conduct them as actively as Mr. Merwin did. It makes them much more interesting when the editor replies to the letters, instead of just printing them as many of the magazines do.

I also want to tell you how much I like the "Inhabited Universe" series. That's the kind of article it's very hard to find anywhere except in science-fiction magazines, and not enough of them appear even in the s-f magazines. I also thought Mr. Pratt's novel was excellent. So were the other stories in the issue, but I liked the novel best.

I am writing this letter, my first to TWS, mostly in the hope that if you print it, some other fans will get in touch with me. I was visiting in the south when I heard about the convention in New Orleans, and I hitch-hiked down, but was able to get there only in time for the last evening, which I enjoyed very much. Now I am eager to hear from other fans, and get to know some of the folks I saw there.

I am particularly interested in hearing from anyone who knows of any science fiction songs or parodies that have been written in the past, or who is interested in writing some. It seemed odd to me that with all the excellent entertainment that was offered the evening I was at the Convention, I didn't hear any singing. Don't science-fiction fans go in for that sort of thing?—*Wernersville, Pa.*

Not to be cynical or anything like that, but Ches, have you ever heard some of the songs written for or by various movements, organizations and societies? Mebbe leave well enough alone?

QUESTION PERIOD
by Harold Hostetler

Dear Editor: Welcome, Sam. Sorry to see Merwin leave although I knew it was going to happen. I hope you keep up Sam's standards, or improve upon them, Sam.

You know, Fletcher Pratt is rapidly becoming one of my favorite writers. His recent novel, ASYLUM SATELLITE, was superb. There wasn't too much romance; there was just the right amount of suspense; there was a medium amount of action. A well-rounded story if I ever saw one. Mr. Pratt (if I may speak to him personally) I congratulate you. All I can say is "more!" I'm eagerly awaiting THE WANDERER'S RETURN in the next issue.

THE PLAGION SIPHON almost equalled Pratt's novel in honors, but not quite. I'd say one-tenth of a point behind. THE MERAKIAN MIRACLE was good, but why the awful ending? Any idiot (well, any *intelligent* idiot) who studied biology knows what a paramecium is. Draco couldn't have missed biology in his education, what do you think?

Of the short stories, RETURN was by far the best. Vive Matheson! What a story! Best short I've read in TWS in a long time. I'll bet it's selected for reprint someday.

ULTIMATE ANSWER was a good second as shorts go. THE CAVE WHERE I AM HIDING wasn't so hot. The philosophy was all right, but the story was not.

Congratulations to Alex Schomburg for a good cover, also the one on FSM. Where's Bergey? Probably demoted. The interior illos were *all* good. See you next month in SS. Where's Bradbury —also vV?—*Box 163, Cairnbrook, Pa.*

As a Fletcher Pratt admirer, you may lick your chops over the following collection soon to be published, in addition to anything you may find close by: DOUBLE JEOPARDY, a long novelet for April TWS, THE SQUARE CUBE LAW, ditto for June, SECOND CHANCE by Kubilius-Pratt, for Spring FANTASTIC, A VIOLATION OF RULES in February 1952 STARTLING—and we have confidential information that Fletcher is even now hard at work on a new novel.

Where's Bergey? On the cover of this issue, for one thing. Where's Bradbury? Still out in California. He made a flying trip to New York recently, but didn't bring us any manuscripts. Where's vV? You'll see a re-issue of SLAN—Collector's item—in the Summer FANTASTIC.

DEPT. OF APPRECIATION

by Jan Romanoff

Dear Sam (Merwin or otherwise): Writing this letter is going to pose somewhat of a problem. Being a fan, I naturally knew that you (Merwin) were leaving your magazines in favor of free lance writing. Where is the problem, you say? Well, only yesterday I learned that you are *not* leaving. So what gives? I am secretly tempted to chuck the whole business and proclaim that Merwin is Mines!

There have been times when I would have complained at the over-use of an author, feeling it tends to make him lie down on the job. However,

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not in the case of Fletcher Pratt. His ASYLUM SATELLITE in the October issue was just as good as the rest of his yarns in recent issues of SS and TWS. Also his ONSLAUGHT FROM RIGEL (WONDER STORY ANNUAL 1950) ranks among the best I have read.

The rest of the issue rates on down in the order they appeared with the exception of Matheson's RETURN.

At the risk of having this filed in the wastebasket, I would like to make a few choice comments on Mr. Merwin's past editorship. Since the days of the late unlamented Sarge, he has constantly improved both TWS and SS. He has ridden the storm of the public's demands without frantically beating a hasty retreat as so many less hardy souls would have done. Under his auspices, several new writers had the thrill of being discovered. Through the banter and insults he has shown he possesses both tact and a sense of humor. The latter, incidentally, is a quality which a lot of people connected with stf lack.

So, in a nutshell, TWS and SS have progressed quite a way due to Merwin's very capable self and if Mines does take over, he will be expected to do as much, if not more.

The letter column, for reasons known only to Merwin, seems to be rather on the dull side this time. In fact, I don't remember when I've seen such a waste of paper. Maybe this will help the people who complain about the regularity of Vick, Silverberg, McCain, Farnham and Bradley letters, to realize that it is these letters by a comparative few, that make the department alive and worth while.

A parting shot at the cover. I'm wondering if Schomburg isn't a Bergey of another color!—*26601 So. Western, Lomita, Calif.*

I am reminded of a comment which comes, I think, from Mark Twain, in which people picked on a public character unmercifully, calling him worthless and worse. And then when he finally retired and his son took over, they grumbled that the boy wasn't the man his father had been! Merwin, are you listening?

FAN ALONE
by Mrs. Philip Gerding

Dear Sam: I want to express my sincere appreciation, not only for printing my letter in your readers' column, but for printing it in one of the best issues of TWS that I've ever had the pleasure of reading.

I'm very happy about it—and I'm sure my letter is, too—to actually be included between the covers of your mag along with Raymond Jones and Arthur Clarke (both are very special to me) a fine group of shorts, some excellent features, an editorial that proved of special interest to me, and bless Bergey for that cover. In other words, my quarter for the August issue hit the jackpot.

I hate to throw cold water in your face, now, but I sure didn't get the results I expected to. Perhaps I expected too much. I did acquire several wonderful new pen friends—but I drew an absolute-blank concerning the preservation of mags and the unveiling of local fans.

I wondered, in my previous letter, if I was the only sf reader and fan here. Now I know darn well I am. I checked at the only store in town where sf and f mags can be bought—and I'm the *only* one that buys them!

Guess I'll have to resign myself to being a lone wolf. I'm no longer entirely new to sf ranks and have learned a little about how to get around via the mail routes. So, guess I'll have to be content with that.

I took care of my magazine problem very nicely. I stopped collecting them. I think what I'm doing with them now is serving a much better purpose. Whenever I run across anyone in need of such material—such as Canadian fans or overseas fans who can't obtain them, or mag collectors, or newcomers to the sf field, or someone who is ill, etc.—I try to take care of their needs. I suppose you could call it a sort of free magazine service. Some people would call me nuts, I guess (I still buy all of them). But I know the pleasure I derive from reading sf and f and, if I can bring that pleasure to a number of other people, all to the good. Lots better than having them rot in a dank, hot, musty old attic.

I did not mean to go on at such length—bad habit of mine. Thanks again for your efforts in my behalf and for taking the time to listen to me.

I honestly tried to find something in the August issue to complain about. All I can say is—no luck. And good luck to you and your baby—TWS.—*Box 484, Roseville, Ill.*

Two markets for your surplus magazines are indicated in this very column, Nancy. And bless you for that generous impulse.

LITERARY COMPETITION
by David A. Bates

Dear Sir: I am sorry to see that Sam Merwin is leaving TWS. The magazine was vastly improved while he edited it.

The October issue is the best this year. All the stories were good and so were the articles. James Blish was by far the best.

ASYLUM SATELLITE was good but the ending seemed to have been cut. Otherwise it was first class.

MERAKIAN MIRACLE was the best. Mainly because of the gal's alienness. I'd like to see more stories with the people completely different from Earthmen.

RETURN would have been better in a fantasy mag. I like Matheson's style of weaving a bit of horror into the plot. Let us have longer stories by him.

All the other stories were good, but the three above were the ones most worthy of mention.

Are you planning a WONDER STORY ANNUAL this year? I would like to see THE FORTRESS OF UTOPIA by Jack Williamson again.

One thing more. I am planning a fanzine and I need material. I need fiction, poetry, book reviews, etc. Material does not need to be typed. It will be a ten to twenty page give out bi-monthly!—*810 Asylum Avenue, Hartford, Conn.*

WONDER STORY ANNUAL should hit the stands shortly after this issue of TWS.

Sorry you didn't speak up about FORTRESS OF UTOPIA sooner. You'll find DEATH OF IRON by S. S. Held as the featured novel. This fine French story of a crisis in the industrial age has been given a distinguished translation by Fletcher Pratt and remains one of the most interesting bits of early science fiction.

GOODBYE AND HELLO
by G. A. Steward

Dear Ex-Serge Saturn: Well, Sam, it looks as tho you put your all into the Oct. 15 ish of TWS, it being the last one you will edit. It was a great issue. I enjoyed every story. ASYLUM SATELLITE was great, THE PLAGIAN SIPHON, sensational, THE MERAKIAN MIRACLE, colossal, ULTIMATE ANSWER, stupendous, THE CAVE WHERE I AM HIDING, astounding, RETURN, amazing. In short the whole darn ish was extraordinaryly good. Especially your editorial.

I particularly liked ASYLUM SATELLITE since it could come true in the near future. Jack Vance's novelet came next. In fact I rate the stories in the same order that they are listed on the contents page.

The cover? A masterpiece. I didn't like Schomburg's effort on FSM, in fact I disliked it muchly but he redeemed himself with his TWS cover. And strange as it may seem it illustrated the lead novel.

Best letters were, in this order: Marion Zimmer Bradley, Lin Carter and Mrs. R. M. Faulkner.

Well, I guess that's all except congratulations, Sam, for a job well done, and welcome Sam Mines.

Whoa, don't go way yet, I'd like to add that if this letter gets into print (which is hardly likely) I would like to hear from some of you fans.—*166 McRoberts Ave., Toronto, Ont., Can.*

Seriously, there is no doubt that Merwin set the course for TWS and SS and the change in the mags has been marked in a short time. All you characters are now sitting around with your fangs sharpened and waiting to see what hoppen. If it will help any, I would remark that the groundwork done by Sam has been invaluable and that it won't be too hard to keep stories and art work on a steadily rising plane. That's a promise.

HOMO SUPERIOR
by J. N. Spillane

Dear Mr. Merwin: Note: The enclosed is not meant as a tirade against all stf or all readers, but merely as a suggestion to re-evaluate our cultural position and as a suggestion to guide us to a unified scientific future. . . .

"Better to hang together . . ."

I am not going to take this opportunity either to compliment or criticize yours or any other stf magazine, as I have had innumerable hours of pleasurable reading from publications in this field,

[*Turn page*]

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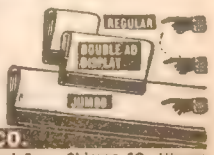

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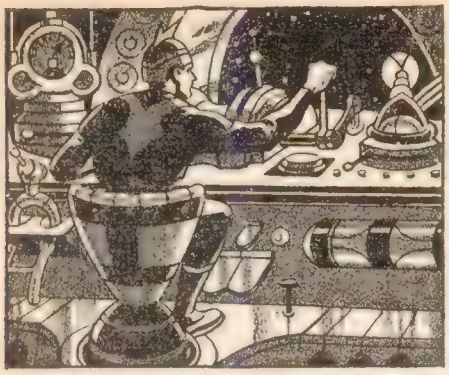

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but I want to emphasize a position that I feel your readers should endeavor to establish in our civilization.

From the many letter columns that appear in stf magazines it is apparent that your readers consider themselves somewhat chronologically advanced and perhaps even a bit superior: yes, superior in their evaluations of the future of science and even superior intellecutally in that they feel they have a more cogent answer to scientific solutions of the sociological problems of our culture.

Thus, if your readers do feel that this superiority is justified, then, and only then, I have a few suggestions to offer for their consideration.

If your readers feel that science through science-fiction can indicate the way to answer the problems that confront us and overcome the sociological lag that exists in relation to our scientific technology, then they should remove the present conscious and immature attempt to maintain an exclusiveness from the majority of people in our culture.

In your letter columns there is an obvious effort made to speak and write uniquely and hence unintelligibly to the novice and illiterate in stf terminology. We *must* make ourselves intelligible to others so that they may gain the mental enlightenment and the assistance that scientific reason can offer to mature thinking. We *must* offer our contemporaries the jewels of writing that often occur in stf magazines: those stories which embody a mature fictional approach to scientific reason, a logical evaluation of future tendencies in present science and perhaps, most important, good short story development that can make stf interesting and understandable to the majority of our people. Selected stf stories already have been used as an example of good thinking and writing in some colleges.

By doing these things, we can raise the level of reason throughout our culture, and also appear to others as mature intellectual leaders rather than as zealots and intellectual snobs speaking gibberish and secluded in futuristic burrows continually squabling over insignificant details while we allow our culture to show all the indications of illogical reasoning, scientific misdirection, sociological immaturity and lack of self-sacrificing and mature leadership.

We can provide all these things but not if we are as subjective as religious zealots, catty as a woman's sewing circle and immature as a high school sorority. To lead we must achieve unity and maturity of thought within our culture and remember—: the future will be the reward of our scientific aloofness. The road to the future, as always will be bordered by the graves of secluded scientific fanatics.—*165 Madison St., Wellsville, N. Y.*

If we interpret this letter correctly, it is aimed more at fans than at writers. In truth, it has been our contention—and our aim to further it—that science-fiction stories are becoming more universal, more aware of the basic ingredients which make good literature, whatever the medium in which they may be cast. This makes them more understandable to larger groups of people. There has been a movement among

certain fans to reverse this, to make our stories more and more esoteric, thus driving away possible readers and making the entire science-fiction movement more and more inbred. This, of course, would spell its death. An art which becomes so highly specialized that only a handful of people are capable of understanding it, or of satisfying each other's extremely critical tastes, winds up with these few creating only for each other, when obviously they should be creating for everyone.

Let's hope science fiction is making strides in the opposite direction. With which cheerful note, we'll bow out and hope to see you all in the next installment of TRS.

—*The Editor*

Science Fiction BOOK REVIEW

FOUNDATION by Isaac Asimov, Gnome Press, New York, $2.75

A RATHER leisurely and philosophical look at the world of the far future, seen through a pair of civilized eyes. Asimov generates little heat; he never gets very seriously angry with anyone. Even in the face of unarguable tyranny, injustice, or what have you, his attitude is still calm and reasonable—boys will be human, and after all what can you expect? The result is slow-paced, pleasant and apparently more than satisfying to uncounted numbers of Asimov fans.

In case you haven't already read the magazine version, FOUNDATION describes the manner in which tyranny grows out of tyranny. The revolutionaries become the new masters. This is hardly a new idea. The French revolution—the Bolshevik revolution—examples are on every hand. Its peculiar adaptation to stf lies in the thought that the scientists will one day come into power to become the new masters.

Hari Sheldon, who pursued a career of "psychohistory" and was mildly persecuted for predicting the fall of a huge Galactic Empire, outwitted his persecutors and set up the research Foundation which, after his death, grew to have more power than the original Empire it opposed. Sheldon's aim was entirely altruistic. Forseeing the fall of the Empire and 30,000 years of

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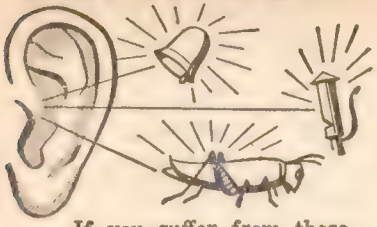

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anarchy and turmoil to succeed it, he planned to cut that troubled period shorter by taking prophylactic measures before the Empire succumbed to its internal diseases. But the founder's ideals rarely survive unchanged through a long line of descendants.

And so Mr. Asimov leaps the centuries, having a look here and there at the effects of a long range policy and its repercussions. And eventually the circle comes full swing again—and again and again. . . .

●

THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW by Robert A. Heinlein, A Signet Book, published by the New American Library, New York, 25¢.

THIS is by way of being an old friend, having first seen the light of day in magazine form under the title THE SIXTH COLUMN in 1941, then appearing in book form with the same title out of Gnome Press. Now its appearance in pocket size is well timed to catch new readers who've been converted to science fiction since its earlier appearance.

Like van Vogt's SLAN, this Heinlein dates back to an earlier period when a few writers of better than average talent were beginning to crack the shell of "any-kind-of-writing-goes-as-long-as-it's-science" and started working toward more serious characterization and a more realistic style. As such, this is a pioneer story. It is ten years old and Heinlein has gone places since—in writing experience as well as success—but it still reads pretty well. Moreover, it is a good, exciting underground story.

America has been completely conquered and subjugated. The people are in bondage tighter than the Nazis ever devised. Only one liberty is allowed them—freedom of religion, for the rulers have found that religion provides an outlet and staves off revolt. So the little underground movement which is left organizes a new religion, complete with temple and priests, and uses it as the basis for a campaign aimed at cracking the power of the invader and winning back their country. Six men against four hundred million, reads the back cover blurb. Makes fast, easy reading. Good fun.

●

THE HOUSE OF MANY WORLDS by Sam Merwin Jr., Doubleday & Co., Inc. Garden City, N. Y., $2.75

PUBLICATION of Sam's first hard cover science-fiction book comes just as his free-lance career gets under way. This novel actual-

ly needs no review for readers of TWS, who require no reminder that it was originally published in this very magazine. But if you happened to miss it—don't—which sounds like a Wilson Mizner in reverse. Just in case: HOUSE OF MANY WORLDS is a parallel time track story, one with all kinds of amusing detours.

A girl feature writer and her photographer blunder upon a mysterious old house which is actually the time-gateway to any one of several worlds. Then they discover that they have been chosen for the delicate job of going into a few of these worlds and tinkering with events to change history just a little bit so that the time tracks will mesh and not foul up things happening on sister tracks. For it is one of the concomitants of the so-called parallel time track theory, that what happens in one dimension affects, invisibly, the worlds in the other dimensions.

So, following this pair, you can have a look at what might have been—if we hadn't happened to invent the airplane, if the Burr-Wilkinson conspiracy had succeeded and these two plotters had become the founding fathers of a new nation called Columbia, instead of the United States. And if—but let's not spoil it for you give the gimmick away.

If you missed HOUSE OF MANY WORLDS in TWS you can have it in a handsome hard cover edition—or you may want to collect it anyway. It's a landmark for Merwin, fixing the point at which he went into full time writing. Of course he is not confining himself to science fiction, but a substantial protion of his output will be stf, so you'll be seeing more of these.

—The Editor

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STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233), of Thrilling Wonder Stories, published bi-monthly at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1951. 1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Standard Magazines, Inc., 10 E. 40th Street, New York, N. Y. Editor, Samuel Mines, 10 E. 40th Street, New York, N. Y. Managing editor, None. Business manager, Harry Slater, 10 E. 40th Street, New York, N. Y. 2. The owner is: Standard Magazines, Inc., 10 E. 40th Street, New York, N. Y., N. L. Pines, 10 E. 40th Street, New York, N. Y. 3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. Paragraphs 2 and 3 include, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting; also the statements in the two paragraphs show the affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner. Harry Slater, business manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 1st day of October, 1951. Eugene Wechsler, Notary Public. (My commission expires March 30, 1952)

The FRYING PAN

A Commentary on Fandom

UPON attending a science-fiction convention, where pro authors and artists and editors may be observed walking about so casually and in such abundance as to seem only half-gods, the freshman fan generally assumes an attitude of peculiar ambivalence. It is manifested by hesitant, stretchy-necked, glassy-eyed worship from afar; crashing, crowding, enormously vocal attempts to establish camaraderie whenever a Name can be flushed from the flock and driven to bay. A fan-editor we know recently analyzed it as follows:

"The explanation for the nutty behavior of the younger fans toward pros," he said, more or less, "lies in the realm of psychiatry. It is a tocsin of hero-worship and envy and father-transference. I'm planning to write an article on it."

We have since secretly hoped that his energies became somehow diverted into less hazardous channels. A "tocsin of hero-worship, envy and father-transference" had obviously better be approached only by persons long experienced in dealing with the human mind.

Be that as it may, we suspect that our fan-editor's gobbledegook struck the head of the nail at least a glancing blow. And since nothing especially brilliant to say about fanzines occurs to us at the moment, we would like to tell you a tale that beautifuly illustrates this curious facet of fannishness.

It is the tale of a visitation enjoyed by Standard Magazines several days ago. We swear that it is true, and admit that it is pointless.

Mid-morning of the day in question the glass doors out in the reception room began to open. Oh, ve-e-r-r-ry hes-i-tant-ly . . . but open they did.

A fan appeared.

Impressions of him vary, as must inevitably impressions acquired at the scene of any crime. But Joan, the lovely at the switchboard, states that he was fairly good-looking, well dressed, about seventeen years young. And that estimate of age is lent a certain weight by his first words on stage: "Phe-e-e-ew!" in an admiring tenor. "You're just my type, baby!"

"Phe-e-e-ew!" in an admiring tenor. "You're just my type, baby!"

Deftly countering this gambit, Joan extracted from him the nature of his mission. He was an out-of-town fan . . . and was it Possible for him to See the Editor of Startling Stories, please, if He wasn't too busy Talking to Authors?

Joan underplayed it. She turned to her switchboard with a quiet little smile. "Why, of course . . . I'll call him. He'll be right out to see you!"

The Fan—we shall call him that—staggered visibly upon receipt of this intelligence. His cavalier manner, at best a translucent mask for fear and trembling, departed in the face of the fact. His eyes bulged, his pulsebeat rose to an audible drone, and in a voice that combined blank incredulity with the very *ne plus ultra* of ecstatic transport he cried:

"Just like that?"

Silver and Jade Bems

So much for idolization, or idealization if you prefer. It may certainly be deduced from this flabbergasted bleat that our aficionado in the reception room had expected to be conducted by hush-voiced secretaries into an editorial sanctum quite some distance out of this or any other world . . . something Jack Vance might nightmare, if he does nightmare. Original Bergeys would line the walls of this Temple of Stf; some old Brownes, too. The ceiling would be made up entirely of Finlays and Orbans, softly and indirectly lighted. A chinchilla carpet stretching from curving stellite wall to stellite wall; a teakwood desk with silver and jade Bems cavorting through its inlaid surface; drapes of spun neutronium, a private solarium and laboratory in one corner, and two blonde stenographers (really too gorgeous to be human) sitting respectfully at the bidding of—

The Master.

Pardon our wistful laughter. Let's replay that scene as it actually happened:

Sam Mines—who is a nice guy with a wife,

[*Turn page*]

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a kid, a Topsy-type dog and a home with a prize lawn out on Long Island—pushed back from his littered oak desk, reached over to shrug into his coat (s. o. p. when seeing visitors in the Showcase), tripped over his typewriter table (his nearest official approach to stenos, blonde or otherwise) on the way to the door, and stumbled forth in a cloud of pained comments to greet the Fan.

Conversation ensued, somewhat dampened at first by the Fan's chagrin at discovering that Sam wasn't nine feet tall. And more conversation, which led eventually to the following dialogue—and, if you will note, just about the quickest transition from awe to lion-bearding on record:

Sam: Yes, we keep the cover paintings for future issues right here in the office until we use them.

Fan: C-could—I *see* one of them?

Sam: (rubbing his leg where he banged the table, but feeling kind of friendly) Well . . . I don't know why not. Come on inside.

(Several moments later Sam and the Fan are standing by the shelves in the art department's stockroom)

Sam: (pulling out a canvas) Here's a new Schomburg—how d'you like it?

Fan: (eyes blazing, fingers clawed, breath trumpeting a ravenous tally-ho through dilated nostrils) CAN I HAVE IT?

(After a reflective moment, stunned but gracious but negative sounds from Sam)

Fan: (moving in tensely) Then—can I have some original illustrations?

Sam: (a little numbly) I'm sorry, but that isn't possible. We put them in storage, and—

Fan: Then how about an original manuscri—

(The suspicion of a man-eating rumble begins in Sam's throat)

Sam: I'm afraid—

Fan: (eyes glaring hypnotically into Sam's) Then maybe you could—

Sam: I—

Fan: —Give me—

It is both startling and thrilling to wonder if the Fan remembers just how he came to be outside in the hall, waiting for an elevator, his hand aching from hearty parting handclasps. It is a known fact that the master barely remembers how he got back to his office.

H'm . . . memories. It all reminds of the time we went up to see JWC, Jr., thirteen years ago when we were a pup. He wasn't nine feet tall either. He was only eight feet tall.

Could only happen in science fiction.

—JEROME BIXBY

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